

WORRRALS **of the W.A.A.F.**



by W.E. Johns

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WORRALS IN THE HANDS OF SPIES

WORRALS
OF THE W.A.A.F.

BY
W. E. JOHNS

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WORRALS TAKES A TRIP

FLIGHT OFFICER JOAN WORRALSON, W.A.A.F., better known to her personal friends as “Worrals”, sat chin in hand on an empty oil-drum and gazed moodily across a deserted aerodrome at the rolling cloudscape beyond.

“The fact is, Frecks,” she told her friend and comrade, Betty Lovell, who sat in a similar attitude on an adjacent drum, “there is a limit to the number of times one can take up a light plane and fly it to the same place without getting bored. Four or five times a week for three months I’ve been doing just that, taking battered Tiger-Moths back to the makers for reconditioning. It’s about as exciting as pedalling a push bike along an arterial road; less, in fact, because on the road there are at least hogs who try to push you off. Men can go off and fight, but girls—oh no.” Her voice took on a note of sarcasm. “Now if they’d only let me take up a kite like that once in a while”—she indicated a Reliant fighter with an inclination of her head—“I should feel I was getting somewhere.”

Frecks smiled faintly.

“You’d get somewhere all right,” she agreed warmly. “You’d probably hit the ground so hard——”

“Rot!” broke in Worrals impatiently. “I flew one the other day.”

“Yes, but Bill Ashton was in it too, and having an instructor on board makes a lot of difference.”

“He sat with his hands up, so that I could see he wasn’t touching the controls.”

“All the same, he was *there*,” persisted Frecks. Her voice took on a new interest. “Did he show you how the guns worked?”

“Yes, I made him. There’s nothing to it. You just press a button on the control column, and brrrr-r-r-r.” Worrals made a noise which was evidently intended to be an imitation of several machine-guns firing simultaneously. Actually, it was nothing like it.

“Well, you’re luckier than I am at any rate,” returned Frecks dolefully. “They won’t even let me take a machine off the ground.”

“You’re in the Service, and that’s something. After all, you’re not eighteen yet.”

Frecks looked pained. “Coming from you, I call that pretty good. Why, you’ve only just turned eighteen yourself.”

“Three months ago,” corrected Worrals. “And you know as well as I do that I only got my ticket quickly because I happen to have an uncle in the Service to vouch for me. Don’t forget I’d been flying solo for a year before the war. You’ll get your wings when you’re eighteen.”

“What has age to do with it?” protested Frecks, warming to her subject. “I can handle a machine as well as you can.”

“Unofficially, yes—officially, no. The government takes the view that a girl of your tender years is not to be trusted with valuable aircraft.”

Frecks’s lips curled scornfully. “You’re telling me! My goodness, if they only knew the risks they were taking when they gave you *your* brevet——”

“Patience, child, patience,” interrupted Worrals. “The boys will be back from patrol any minute now; I want to watch for them.”

She resumed her scrutiny of the horizon, a faint smile playing about the corners of her mouth, for there was some justification in Frecks’s complaint. They could both fly, and they had both been gazetted as officers in the W.A.A.F., but whereas Worrals wore the coveted “wings” on the left breast of her tunic, regulations forbade Frecks to put hers up until she had attained the age of eighteen. For three months they had been attached to “N” Squadron, a Home Defence Unit under Squadron Leader McNavish, but with a training squadron on the same aerodrome. Worrals’s duties consisted almost entirely in returning old training machines for reconditioning, and bringing back new ones, but as she was allowed to carry a passenger there were many occasions when she was able to take Frecks with her.

Not even her friends could truthfully call Worrals pretty, although her features were regular enough—perhaps too regular: but that she was attractive in a way not easy to define no one could deny. She was dark; her hair was brown and always tidy; her eyes, the same colour, were steady and thoughtful except when softened by a flash of humour—as they often were. They could also gleam aggressively when things went wrong. Her nose was well cut, with delicately chiselled nostrils, and balanced a firm mouth with lips that were, perhaps, judging by orthodox standards of beauty, a trifle too thin. Of average height, her figure was slim and neat—prim, the lower school had sometimes called her when she had occasion to exercise her authority as Head of the School to check those who would disturb the peace;

for, inclined to be studious when not on the playing fields—and there were those who said she took games too seriously—she had no time for horseplay. She carried herself with a quiet air of authority that seemed to come natural to her, and a confidence for which a year of travel to polish up her favourite subject, languages, may have been partly responsible.

It must have been the attraction of opposites that resulted in a mutual affection between her and Betty Lovell, who was fair, casual, and appeared to take nothing seriously—except perhaps tennis, on which she expended more energy than her slight wiry figure seemed capable of containing, especially when playing a losing game. Betty's mirror having told her that she had no pretensions to good looks, she wasted no time in trying to devise by artificial means what nature had denied her. The result was a frank untidiness which not even Worrals could cure. Her straight flaxen hair was usually out of control, and her blue eyes laughed at those who advised lemon juice for the freckles which appeared every summer on each side of her small aggressive nose, to provide her with a nickname which she accepted philosophically, as she accepted everything else that came along. "They don't hurt," she explained naïvely to those who urged their obliteration. In her heart she admired Worrals for the shrewd common sense that lay behind her calm brown eyes, and, though fearless herself, for a courage which she felt instinctively was there should it ever be called into action. She had not yet seen it displayed—but that was soon to come.

For the rest, each was confident of the unshakable loyalty of the other, a loyalty that had not yet been tested severely although this, too, was shortly to be weighed in the grim balance of active service.

They were still waiting for the evening patrol to come in when an orderly arrived and, addressing Worrals, informed her that the Commanding Officer wished to see her forthwith at Station Headquarters.

Worrals got up. "I wonder what the old bear wants now," she breathed.

"You'll learn," advised Frecks, affecting a slight sing-song drawl which, consciously or unconsciously, she sometimes employed, having—to use her own expression—"caught it" from the screen, to which she was devoted.

"Oh, cut it out, Garbo," jibed Worrals, who professed abhorrence of Hollywood jargon, although it often made her smile, even when she found herself catching the habit from Frecks. "I'll be back," she called, and walked quickly towards Headquarters.

She knew why she had been sent for as soon as she crossed the threshold, for her particular pal among the officers of the Service Squadron,

Flying Officer Bill Ashton, was already there, standing at attention, looking very uncomfortable.

The C.O., Squadron Leader McNavish, regarded her coldly; and when Squadron Leader McNavish looked cold, junior officers swore they could see their breath. In appearance, at any rate, he bore no resemblance whatever to a bear, in spite of Worrals's hastily snatched epithet. He was a small, fierce-looking Scot from Aberdeen. His hair, of reddish tint, bristled, and a "guardy" moustache of the same hue gave him more the expression of a belligerent wire-haired terrier. His eyes were steely blue and had a gimlet-like quality that was definitely disconcerting. There was nothing smooth, or soft, or reassuring about Squadron Leader McNavish, D.S.O., D.F.C., even at the best of times; but he was a fighter, as a double row of medal ribbons under his wings testified. When he spoke it was as though the ice were cracking, ice that was roughened by a slight Scots burr.

"Miss Worralson," he began without preamble, "I have been informed that contrary to standing orders you have had the temerity to make a flight in a Reliant. Is this correct?"

Worrals wasted no time in futile argument. "Yes, sir."

"You've read standing orders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps you think because you have a near relative a senior officer in the Service, routine orders don't apply to you?"

Worrals flushed slightly. "No, sir."

"You think, perhaps, this is a school outing?"

Worrals clenched her teeth and forced the words through them. "No, sir."

"You made the flight with Flying Officer Ashton?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"Silence!" The C.O.'s fist made the inkwell jump. "You know he will be punished?"

"It was not his fault, sir," protested Worrals hotly. "I persuaded him to do it."

The C.O.'s face registered incredulity. He blinked. He frowned. His eyes gimleted into Worrals. "What's this?" he purred, in tones of disbelief. "You, wearing an officer's uniform, persuade another officer to break standing orders. Officers? I'll no' believe it. Why did you do it?" The final question shot out like a burst of machine-gun fire.

In spite of herself Worrals flinched. “I thought it might be a good thing if I learned how to fly a Reliant. An emergency could arise when I might be called upon to fly one.”

Squadron Leader McNavish permitted himself to smile. It was like a ray of watery sun breaking through a December cloud. “Miss Worrals,” he said bitingly, “if and when it is decided to teach young women to fly fighting aeroplanes—and for the sake of everyone else in the sky I hope that time is not yet—you will receive your orders from me. I see that you have been granted week-end leave, starting to-morrow. Your leave is cancelled. That’s all.”

“But——”

The C.O. snarled like a wounded tiger. “I said that’s all.”

“Yes, sir.” Worrals marched stiffly from the room, her face pink and white alternately. In the outer office an orderly-room sergeant was humming under his breath, “We’re in the army now.” Worrals didn’t stop until she came to the oil-drum.

“What was it?” greeted Frecks. “Did he want to congratulate you on your ability to fly Reliants?”

“Not exactly,” returned Worrals bitterly. “He nearly bit me in halves and then cancelled my leave.”

“What? Say, that’s too bad. The old bear ought to be muzzled.”

“On the contrary he was quite right. I acted against orders,” answered Worrals evenly. “I’m sick about Bill, though. He’s on the mat, too.”

Presently Bill walked past smiling. “Don’t worry, kid,” he called.

“Don’t call me kid,” flared Worrals. Then, with a change of tone: “What did he do to you?”

“Same as you—cancelled my leave. I’ve got to do a week at the advanced post instead. I’m going off right away by car.”

“Sorry, Bill.”

“Forget it. S’long, Worrals—s’long, Frecks. Be good girls.” He walked on, debonair and unperturbed.

“I feel awful,” muttered Worrals, as she watched his car disappear. “I’ve lost him his leave.”

“Okay, okay, don’t burst into tears about it—the airmen are watching,” murmured Frecks. “And,” she continued quickly, “here comes the old bear himself. He looks about as congenial as a scalded cat.”

Squadron Leader McNavish went first to the Reliant, where he spoke to the mechanic on guard; then with knitted brows he walked over to the girls. He stopped in front of them, but for a moment appeared to be at a loss for words.

“Er—Miss Worrals,” he got out at last, “how did you get on with the Reliant when you flew it the other day?”

Worrals started, then stared. “Perfectly all right, sir. She was no harder to fly than a Tiger.”

“You think you could—er—fly one again?”

Worrals’s eyes sauced. “Of course, sir.”

The C.O. seemed to find it difficult to come to the point. “The fact is,” he snapped at last, “I’ve just sent Mr. Ashton away, and now I am informed he was the only reserve pilot on the Station. There’s been a minor crash at the advanced post and they need another machine right away to replace it. The weather’s right for the Boche to make another raid on the aerodrome, so I daren’t go myself. Do you think you could fly”—the C.O. nodded towards the Reliant—“that aircraft down to the post? It’s only a matter of a ten minutes’ flight. I could send transport to bring you back.”

Worrals’s eyes glowed, and it was only with difficulty that she kept a straight face, for the C.O.’s embarrassment was almost painful to watch. “It’s as good as there, sir,” she promised.

“Thank you, Miss Worrals—I mean Worrals.”

“Do you mind if I take a passenger, sir?”

The C.O. glanced at Frecks, knowing who was meant.

He hesitated.

“The Reliant flies better with a passenger,” prompted Worrals.

“All right—but for goodness’ sake never tell your uncle.”

“I wouldn’t think of such a thing,” murmured Worrals reproachfully.

Five minutes later she was in the cockpit, with Frecks in the gunner’s seat. The propeller was a whirling arc of light. “Hold your breath,” she sang, and eased the throttle open. The engine roared. The tail lifted, and the aircraft sped like an arrow towards the clouds.

From about 2,000 feet Worrals made a swift survey of the landscape to pick up her landmarks, for the aerodrome, heavily camouflaged, could not easily be distinguished. The ceiling was lower than she had thought, great masses of cumulus cloud drifting sluggishly across the sky from just above her head for several thousand feet. Knowing that she might encounter the

patrol which by now must be on its way home from its North Sea assignment, and aware of the danger of collision in such conditions, she decided to go above the murk into the clear. She knew the position of the advanced post, where a Flight was kept in readiness for instant action, too well to have any qualms about finding it. A little more backward pressure on the stick and the Reliant leapt to—in professional parlance—the “sunnyside.”

As she levelled out she saw a grey shadow, some distance below her, glide swiftly from one cloud back to the next. It was a plane, a slim, twin-engined high-wing monoplane, with ultra-tapered wings. Instantly a puzzled expression crossed her face, for although she saw the machine only for a moment she had time to note that the type was unknown to her; which was strange, she thought, because she prided herself that there was not a machine in the sky that she could not recognize at sight. Oddly enough, too, the machine carried no nationality markings. However, she was not unduly concerned, assuming it to be a new British type under test. Uppermost in her mind was satisfaction that she had kept clear of the clouds.

“Did you see that?” she called to Frecks.

“See what?”

“Evidently you didn’t. A strange machine has just disappeared into the clouds below us.”

“Goodness! I hope it wasn’t a Hun,” cried Frecks, her voice shrill with alarm.

“There’s always a possibility of running into one,” replied Worrals casually. Which was, of course, true.

It is doubtful if even she knew what made her switch on the radio at that moment, although she afterwards said that it was merely curiosity, to see if it was working. Anyway, she switched it on and tuned in. Almost at once came a man’s voice, level, calm, dispassionate. “. . . with tapered wings. Station XXB calling all aircraft Fighter Command. In area 21—C—2, twin-engined, high-wing monoplane with tapered wings, painted grey, no markings. Last seen heading south. This aircraft must be stopped at all costs. Station XXB calling all aircraft Fighter Command. . . .” The message was repeated and then cut out.

Long before it had ended the Reliant was streaking back over its course towards the towering mass of cumulus into which the strange monoplane had disappeared. That it was the one referred to by the announcer Worrals had no doubt whatever. Not only did the description tally, but she was in the

zone indicated by the letter 21—C—2. Eight words of the significant signal drummed in her ears. “This aircraft must be stopped at all costs.” *At all costs*. That could only mean one thing, and Worrals’s lips went parchment dry at the unmistakable meaning of the grim signal. The grey monoplane had got to be shot down. Doubtless the sky was full of British fighters seeking it—yet, perhaps, she was the only pilot who had seen it.

Moistening her lips she gave the Reliant full throttle and tore on. Banking round the big cloud, and at the same time diving steeply, she found herself in a world of detached, solid-looking masses of gleaming white mist. Swiftly she examined the cloudscape, section by section, but not another plane was in sight. The only movement was the shadow of her own machine, huge and distorted, surrounded by an opalescent halo, flashing at fantastic speed across a cloud-bank beside her. Further to the west where the sun was beginning to set the glare was terrific, and might have concealed a hundred machines. Holding out her hand at arm’s length and extending her fingers, she peered through the slits and was just in time to see a grey shadow sink into the lower layer of billowing vapour. In a split second the Reliant’s nose was round, tilted down in a screaming dive towards the spot.

“What’s going on?” yelled Frecks.

“Did you get that signal through your earphones?”

“Yes.”

“The wanted machine is just in front of us. I’m going after it.”

Frecks uttered a strange sound, something between a gasp and a moan.

The next moment the Reliant was swallowed up in a swirling fog as it plunged into the cumulus.

Worrals watched her altimeter. She knew she was getting low, and the cloud was thicker than she had supposed. Fog, fog, and still more fog: it raced past, grey and impenetrable, blotting out everything. It was confusing. The instrument needles began to jerk about in an alarming fashion. In sheer desperation she throttled back and steadied the machine into a glide, the wind wailing over the wings. Then, with the altimeter needle quivering on the thousand feet mark, to her infinite relief she was through. Below lay an open English countryside, grey and dour, beneath the canopy of cloud, open fields divided by hedgerows, with occasional houses and grazing cattle. A grey horse stood out conspicuously. The scene was photographed on her memory.

At first she feared that she had lost her quarry, for there was no sign of it. Then she saw it, and caught her breath in amazement, for it was on the

ground—or so low that it appeared to be on the ground, she was not sure which. It was about a mile ahead, skimming between two woods, over a long strip of sward punctuated by small yellow spots. From the air it was a curious phenomenon, this speckled strip of green, but Worrals knew it was a golf course, the yellow spots being sand bunkers. With her eyes still on the machine she opened the throttle wide. The engine bellowed. Simultaneously she noted several things. She distinctly saw the tiny round blob that was the pilot's head turn from black to white, and she knew he was looking up at her. On the ground a man was running into the trees. Something seemed to fall from the monoplane, which banked steeply and then zoomed up into the clouds. Worrals's hands and feet moved swiftly, and the Reliant followed it, perhaps 400 yards behind.

It is not to be supposed that she was undisturbed by this swift sequence of events; on the contrary, her nerves were tingling like banjo strings. Her mouth was dry and her heart was pounding furiously. Yet her brain seemed clear and her actions automatic. She made them without thinking. It gave her a thrill to realize that she no longer had to think about flying the machine; it had become mechanical, and for the first time she knew how pilots must feel in a dog-fight. The ordinary risks of handling a high-performance aircraft disappeared in the face of dangers more urgent and more apparent.

The Reliant clawed its way through the clammy vapour once more into the sunshine, and a glance revealed the monoplane speeding southwards just above a cloud-layer. The zoom had carried Worrals far above it, and she knew that with her extra height she could overtake it. Her face, although she did not know it, was like white marble; her lips a thin straight line; her eyes, expressionless. The hand that moved towards the gun control was stone cold. She jerked the handle up. Her thumb found the small round button which, when pressed, would spurt a hail of death. "I've got to do it," she told herself. Then again, "I've got to do it. This is war."

She eased the control column forward and the grey monoplane seemed to float towards her. Her feet adjusted the rudder-bar, bringing the gun sights in line. Nearer and nearer floated the monoplane until it seemed to fill them. It was all quite impersonal. She could see nobody in the machine. The aircraft was just a thing, an object that "had to be stopped at all costs."

Almost viciously she jammed down the button. Instantly, little specks of orange flame spurted from the muzzles of her guns. They ended in gleaming silver lines that leapt across the intervening distance and ended at the starboard engine of the grey monoplane. Black smoke swirled aft. The sickly reek of it, mingled with the biting fumes of cordite, poured into

Worrals's lungs. She coughed. When she looked up the monoplane had disappeared.

GREY HORSES

Worrals flew on feeling strangely limp. The events of the last few minutes had assumed the character of a dream, a vivid nightmare from which she could not awaken. She tried to make herself believe that these things were not really happening, but the self-deception failed. She was, too, not a little appalled, for in spite of her remarks to Frecks it had never occurred to her that even although she wore a uniform she might find herself involved in actual war. In her heart she hated war, but lately she had learned to hate more those who made it inevitable by wanton aggression, or by forcing barbaric creeds and doctrines upon those who only sought peace. When that happened, then resistance was the only answer. At such times every member of the threatened community owed a duty to the State, and once that decision was made there could be no turning back, no flinching from the ordeals that must certainly arise, however distasteful they might be. Had she failed to do what she had just done, then not only would she have betrayed the allegiance she had sworn when she accepted the King's Commission, but she would have proved herself unworthy of her uniform and all that it stood for.

"Are you all right, Frecks?" she called.

"Yes," answered Frecks weakly. "You hit it."

"Did you see where it went?"

"Yes, into the cloud."

"Hold tight, I'm going to have a look."

Worrals throttled back, and easing the control column forward began groping her way down through the cloud. A barrage balloon loomed up in front of her like a monstrous apparition, and she had to swerve wildly to avoid it, for this was a danger she had completely forgotten. However, the shock did much to restore her to normal. The ground, fast darkening in the evening light and sullen under its misty cloak, came into view; a short distance ahead the sea licked a brown sandy beach, but of the monoplane there was no sign. She recognized the place, and was relieved to find that she was no great distance from her original objective—the Squadron's advanced post.

She spent five minutes looking for the grey monoplane, and then gave it up, deciding that her duty was now to deliver the machine without further loss of time, and to hand in her report.

Her nerves relaxed as she lowered her wheels and landed on the emergency ground that was now occupied by the advanced post, more commonly known in the Squadron as the “A.P.” A little group of officers were standing outside the sandbagged shelter which they used as a mess; they turned to face the Reliant when it appeared, and then hurried forward to meet Worrals as she taxied up to them and switched off. Among them was Bill Ashton.

His face was a picture. “Stiffen the crows!” he gasped. “What are you doing here?”

Worrals jumped down. “The C.O. told me to bring this machine along,” she answered quickly. “Did you get a signal about a grey monoplane?”

“Too true we did.”

“I picked up the message in the air. I had just seen the machine, so I went back after it. I had a shot at it and I think I got its engine.”

Bill’s lips parted in amazement and he threw up his hand in a gesture of helplessness. “You only *think* you hit it? Well, somebody certainly hit it, and it must have been you because nobody else saw it. It’s down—crashed only a few fields away.”

Worrals gulped. “Was anybody—hurt?”

“The fellow who was flying it is in a bit of a mess, but otherwise all right. He’s a civilian, too.”

“Is it one of our machines?”

Bill shook his head. “Don’t ask me. It’s all a mystery. We may know more about it later—or we may not. The machine was evidently making for the sea, and the Air Ministry were certainly upset about it.”

The other officers crowded round while Frecks joined Worrals on the ground. They were profuse in their congratulations.

“Your transport’s here to take you back,” announced Bill. “There’s no desperate hurry, though. Come into the mess and have a cup of tea—it’s on the table.”

“I could certainly do with one,” declared Worrals feelingly. “By the way, does the C.O. know about this plane being shot down?”

“He knows it’s down, but he doesn’t know who did it.”

Frecks shook her head sadly. "It's going to be a bad business for us when he finds out," she drawled ruefully.

"I shouldn't worry too much about that; you did a nice job," declared Bill. He grinned. "In fact, I couldn't have done it better myself."

"Coming from you, I take that as a compliment," announced Worrals, for Bill Ashton already had eight enemy aircraft to his credit. "Just a minute, Bill," she went on quickly. "Let the others go inside—I want a word with you."

Bill glanced at her face and saw that her expression had become serious. "What's wrong, kid?" he asked quickly.

"I do wish you wouldn't call me kid," snapped Worrals. "How old are you, anyway—twenty?"

"Nearly," laughed Bill. "What's on your mind?"

Worrals explained. "When I get back to Headquarters I shall have to make a report. I'm wondering how much to say, and I'm not thinking altogether about the monoplane. That's all straightforward. When I first saw it I saw something else, something . . . Oh, I don't know . . . perhaps I'm talking through my hat."

"Go on—what was it?"

"The machine seemed just about to land. I'm sure the engine was off, anyway, because the instant I opened my throttle I saw the pilot look up at me. If his engine had been on he wouldn't have heard me. There was also a man on the ground. He bolted into the trees. The man in the machine seemed to be waving or signalling to the man underneath, but the moment he saw me he zoomed up into the murk."

"But——"

"Just a minute—I haven't finished yet," went on Worrals quickly. "Three times during the past week our aerodrome has been raided—in daylight. Hasn't it struck you as odd, considering how well the aerodrome is camouflaged, that enemy aircraft can find us so easily? Why, I have a job to find the place myself. How much harder it must be for a pilot who has never seen the aerodrome before."

Bill's eyes clouded. "What are you getting at?"

"Just this. Call me a fool if you like, but I've got a nasty feeling that there's something funny going on."

"Woman's intuition, eh?" Bill was frankly sceptical.

“Intuition that’s so strong that if I’d never seen the aerodrome before I could bomb it any day I liked,” declared Worrals curtly.

“You don’t mean that?”

“I certainly do.”

“What gives you that idea?”

Worrals drew a deep breath. “Have you noticed that on the south side of the aerodrome, within a mile of it, a grey horse has been turned out to grass?”

Bill’s eyes went round with wonder. “I can’t say that I have. What’s a grey horse to do with bomb raids, anyway?”

“Only this. Once or twice in bad weather that horse has given me a line on the aerodrome, but I must admit that until to-day I never gave it a thought that somebody else might do the same thing—if he knew the horse was there. You see, at the place where that monoplane was going to land, or near it, there was also a grey horse turned out to grass. It stood out like a piece of chalk on a blackboard. Now, if I was an enemy pilot, and crossed the coast at Sandford Bay, which can’t very well be missed, I should be able to see that first grey horse, the one that grazes near our aerodrome. I’m talking about flying pretty high, of course. If I dropped a bomb a mile beyond that second horse I should be pretty certain of hitting our aerodrome—whether I could see the aerodrome or not. Now do you get my meaning? That’s all. Keep it to yourself—I don’t want people to laugh at me for an alarmist. The question is, are these horses just a coincidence, or has somebody put them there? At the rate we’re being bombed . . . I’m beginning to wonder . . . Ought I to report it to the C.O.?”

Bill looked grave. “I don’t think I should put that in the report,” he said slowly. “A better plan would be to mention it to the C.O., and leave him to judge whether or not it ought to be passed on to the Intelligence people.”

“You must admit that a spy, or a fifth columnist, could mark aerodromes in such a way?”

“Now you put it like that—yes,” admitted Bill. “I’ll fly around and have a look at these gee-gees myself at the first opportunity. It certainly is an idea, and I’ll think about it. Meanwhile, you’d better be getting back, or the Old Man will be biting bits off his whiskers and spitting them all over his desk. Come on, you’ve just time for a dish of tea.”

After a quick tea and a wash the girls felt better, particularly as Squadron Leader McNavish had by this time been told over the telephone of the monoplane episode—without the wires fusing.

In half an hour they were back at the aerodrome. Leaving the car, they made their way quickly to Headquarters where the C.O. awaited their arrival.

There was a peculiar look on his face as he greeted them. “Miss Worralson,” he said succinctly, “when I asked you to deliver an aircraft for me, I did not, I trust, imply that you were at liberty to engage enemy machines, or otherwise take part in war operations?”

“You did not, sir,” confirmed Worrals. “But the signal expressly called all aircraft of the Fighter Command. The machine I was flying came into that group, consequently it came under the direct orders of the Higher Authority.”

A flicker of what might have been humour glinted in the C.O.’s frosty eyes. “How did you come to have the radio turned on?”

“If the radio is not to be turned on, sir, for what purpose is it installed in an aircraft?”

Squadron Leader McNavish actually smiled. “You know all the answers, don’t you?” he said softly. “As one pilot to another I congratulate you on your skill and initiative—now wait a minute—but officially, I must warn you that you simply must not do this sort of thing. What would your uncle say if he knew? Think what propaganda the enemy would make of the incident if it were learned that—er—ladies were now manning British fighter aircraft.”

“It might give them ideas in the same direction,” suggested Worrals. “The guns fired just as well for me as if a noble Wing Commander had pressed the button.”

“Yes—er—no doubt, no doubt. Guns are like that; they have no discrimination,” muttered the C.O. crisply.

“May I ask what all this business with the monoplane was about?”

“Officially—no, but since you were concerned with the affair I can tell you, for your private ear alone, that an enemy agent nearly succeeded in getting away with one of our hush-hush prototypes. To prevent complications I have informed the Air Ministry that it was brought down by one of my officers, without mentioning names, you understand. You may get credit for the action later. Never refer to it again.”

“There’s just one other thing, sir,” said Worrals, and told of her suspicions regarding the grey horses.

The C.O.’s smile grew broader as he listened. To upset Worrals even more, he patted her arm affectionately. “Don’t let success go to your head,

my girl,” he said suavely. “Our job is flying aeroplanes. Spy watching is a business for the counter-espionage people. Forget about the livestock.”

Worrals rejoined Frecks. “There are moments,” she said bitterly, some time later, as they sat talking in her quarters, “there are moments, I say, when I wonder whether some of our senior officers have sawdust in their heads instead of brains. Here I get an inspiration and offer it to the C.O. on a plate. What does he do? Does he fall on my neck and call me Sherlock? No. Does he say, ‘Brilliant, my dear Watson’? No. He says, ‘Forget it’—just like that. When the enemy come over again and blow a lot of new lily ponds in the aerodrome, he’ll still be walking about scratching his head, wondering how they found the place.”

“Are you going to forget it?” inquired Frecks.

“I am not,” declared Worrals emphatically.

“So what?”

“In view of what I did to-day, I’m going to ask for my week-end leave to be restored,” decided Worrals. “After what’s happened he can’t very well turn it down. Your leave still stands, so we’ll go together.”

Frecks’s blue eyes blinked. “Go where?”

“To have a closer look at these gentlemen who go in for grey horses and wait for stray aeroplanes on a golf course,” returned Worrals calmly.

“You’re crazy,” snorted Frecks. “You’ll get shot—or something horrid.”

“We shall see,” prophesied Worrals, with greater accuracy than probably she imagined.

MYSTERY AT THE GOLF COURSE

As she anticipated, Worrals had no difficulty in getting her leave restored; indeed, inquiry at the orderly room elicited the fact that the C.O. had gone to the Air Ministry, but had signed the passes before he left—without waiting to be asked. So after all, shortly after lunch on Saturday, Worrals drove through the aerodrome gates in her car. Frecks occupied the spare seat. Reaching the main road, the car turned in the direction of the meadow in which the nearer grey horse grazed.

“If we don’t have any luck here we’ll go on and try the second,” announced Worrals to Frecks, who, like herself, was in mufti.

Five minutes later she brought the car to a stop by the side of the road that bounded the field in which the grey horse was standing.

“Looks innocent enough, doesn’t he?” she murmured, eyeing the animal reflectively. “We shan’t get any information out of him, so we may as well go on to the farm—that looks like it a bit further on.”

“Say, what are you going to do?” asked Frecks in some alarm. “You can’t just——”

“Leave it to me,” interrupted Worrals, and turned into the farmyard.

As she expected on a Saturday afternoon, the farmer was at home, and she stated her business right away.

“That’s a nice-looking grey hack you’ve got out to grass just down the road,” she said. “I’ve noticed him two or three times. I think he’d carry me nicely, so I’ve looked in to see if he is for sale?”

The farmer, a genial-looking old man, smiled and shook his head. “Sorry, miss. He ain’t mine, else you could have him.”

“But that’s your meadow, surely?”

“Well, it is and it ain’t, as you might say,” was the ambiguous answer. “I let the field to a gentleman last Michaelmas; he turned the horse in shortly afterwards, and it’s been there ever since.”

“Perhaps you could tell me where he lives?” suggested Worrals, putting on an encouraging smile. “If I went and saw him, perhaps we could do a deal.”

The farmer, who informed them that his name was Tyson, tilted his hat back and scratched his head. "It's a funny thing you should say that," he asserted. "I was a-sayin' to my missus only the other day as how it was a funny thing we never heard from him again."

Worrals was astonished, and looked it. "You mean—you let a field to a man without knowing who he was?"

"Well, not exactly that, miss. He comes along one day and asks me if I'd any grazing land to spare. When I asks him why—well, to make a long story short he told me he had a stable, but being hard hit by the war was obliged to put his horses out to grass. I didn't particularly want that little six-acre meadow; he offered me a fair price for it so I let him have it. He paid spot cash. I give him a receipt, and that was that. A day or two later I see the hoss in the field—and it's been there ever since."

"But surely he told you his name—if only for the receipt?"

"He did, but I'm blowed if I can remember it, though I've often tried. But it was Corton, or Coryton, or something like that."

"What sort of man was he—what did he look like?" persisted Worrals.

"I can tell yer that. He was a tall, thin, middle-aged man with a big, hooky nose. Mebbe he was fifty. He was dressed in them things they calls plus-fours, he was. Looked quite a toff. Wore an eyeglass, I remember, and had a bit of a stoop. As I say, he didn't leave an address, and I didn't think to ask for it. That's all I can tell you, miss."

"Thanks, much obliged. Perhaps I'll call later, in case he happens to have got in touch with you," said Worrals. "Good afternoon."

"G'rafnoon, miss."

"I'm no salesman, but that strikes me as an odd way of doing business," remarked Worrals as they went on down the road. "This thing gets fishier and fishier. Honest men are not so secretive about their names and addresses as this fellow who owns the grey horse."

"What about Tyson? Is he all right, do you think?"

"One can never tell, but I should say he's innocent enough. The man we've got to find is Corton or Coryton."

"Isn't England a big place to start looking for him?"

"You seem to forget that we've got another horse to visit."

"Is that where we're going now?"

"We are. We ought to do it in an hour. Come on, Snooks." Worrals's last remark was addressed to the car, an inconspicuous Morris, which did its best

under this frivolous nickname.

Actually, it took them nearly two hours to find what they sought, not so much on account of distance as the difficulty of finding their way through the maze of lanes around their destination, in spite of the fact that Worrals had marked the spot on a large-scale map.

“They certainly tucked their golf links away off the beaten track,” observed Frecks.

However, they found the place at last, a mere hamlet in a depression between the Downs, so remote that even inhabitants of the country might pass by all their lives without knowing it was there. There were about a score of old-world cottages clustered round a village green, a tiny church and, at a distance, a manor-house set in the midst of the wild, uncultivated heath-land that occupies so much of Surrey: gorse, heather and bracken, broken occasionally by groups of silver birch or drooping fir. Here and there an attempt had been made to create a pasturage on the light sandy soil, and in one such field, behind the manor, the grey horse was standing with sagging head, seeming to regard its meagre diet with melancholy disfavour. The golf course could be seen from a slight eminence, a bend in the road as it wound over a low hill.

Worrals regarded it with thoughtful eyes. “A nine-hole course,” she observed. “There’s no club-house, from which we may assume that it’s a private one—such as it is. Did you ever see such a primitive affair? It looks as though it might have been made by a jobbing gardener. Look at the absurd little bunkers, set in a straight line, all at one end of the fairway, too. What sort of a hazard do you call that? The first tee seems to be near the manor, so it rather looks as though the course belongs to it.” She pointed. “That’s where the machine was going to land when I spotted it, on the fairway, down there in the dip, between those two clumps of trees.”

“What are you going to do about it now you’re here?” queried Frecks.

Worrals continued to ponder the scene. “I wonder if it’s possible to find out if the machine did actually land. If it did there might be wheel marks, or possibly oil. I’ll tell you what. We’ll leave the car among those silver birches on the left, where it won’t be seen from the road, and do a spot of walking. Even if we’re ticked off for trespassing no one will suspect our real purpose. If we draw blank, then we’ll make some inquiries in the village.”

“That seems a sound scheme,” agreed Frecks.

It did not take them long to put the car out of sight, and as soon as this was done they set off down the slope towards the woods, stopping

sometimes to affect admiration of the view in case they were being watched, although as far as they could see there was not another soul in sight. Rabbits scurried across their path; rooks wheeled lazily homeward.

“We’d better not be too long,” warned Frecks, as they walked. “The time’s getting on, and we don’t want to get benighted in this dismal place.”

“The week-end is our own, so we needn’t worry about time,” replied Worrals.

After that they were silent until they reached the fairway, which they now saw was so rough that it could hardly be used for the purpose for which it was apparently designed. On either side rioted tall, luxuriant bracken.

“I should be sorry to play golf here,” muttered Worrals. “It would cost me a fortune in balls.” She stood contemplating the scene, while a little frown creased her forehead. “You know, Frecks,” she went on, “I have a feeling that there’s something odd about this place. The man who laid it out certainly had ideas of his own, peculiar ideas, too. To start with, look at those sand bunkers. There are no fewer than six, and all in a straight line; all bang in front of a tee where a player would certainly drive right over the top of them. If the fellow wanted six, why not distribute them along the fairway? Then again, you can see that originally there was only one wood here; the fairway was laid through the middle of it, cutting it in two. Why go to all that expense when the wood could easily have been avoided? And, having gone to all that expense, why not keep the thing in some sort of order, instead of letting it get into this state?”

“Perhaps the owner lost all his money and couldn’t afford to keep it up,” suggested Frecks practically.

“That may be the answer,” agreed Worrals, “but I still think it’s queer. Let’s have a closer look.”

They walked slowly up the fairway, studying the ground closely, and finally reached the cutting between the trees; but there were no such signs as those they sought. They persisted in the search for half an hour, and were about to abandon it when Frecks noticed something that brought an exclamation of surprise to her lips. She pointed it out to Worrals, and they hurried nearer. It was an iron hook, projecting from the side of a tree that stood on the very edge of the fairway. It was about twelve feet above the ground.

“That *has* got me guessing,” declared Worrals, staring at it. “It hasn’t been there very long—it isn’t even rusty. Now for what possible reason would anyone——” She broke off, ruminating.

“Look, there’s another over the far side,” cried Frecks.

Worrals spun round, and saw that it was true. Another hook, precisely like the first, was fixed in a tree on the opposite side of the fairway.

They made a quick scrutiny of the neighbouring trees, but there were no more.

Suddenly Worrals laughed. “Don’t tell me that this is where they put up the clothes line and hang out the washing!”

Frecks shook her head. “I don’t get it,” she drawled.

“Nor I,” admitted Worrals, “yet there must be a reason for these hooks—unless there’s a lunatic wandering about.”

Frecks caught her arm. “Look out! There’s a man coming,” she hissed.

Worrals looked up quickly and saw that a man had appeared in sight at the far end of the fairway. He carried a golf club and was in the act of addressing a ball.

“Quick! He mustn’t see us,” snapped Worrals, and made a dive for the bracken.

From this green refuge they watched the man approach, and it was at once obvious that he was not playing serious golf. He carried a single iron club, and knocked the ball along in front of him in an impatient manner. But reaching a spot almost opposite the girls he glanced about him quickly, almost furtively, and then dropped on his knees in one of the bunkers. For a moment he appeared to scrape the sand aside with his hand, but what he did after that was not apparent. Finally, he stood up, and after another quick glance round tossed something into the bracken. This done he walked on, briskly, making no further pretence of playing.

Worrals held Frecks’s arm until he was out of sight, and then made a bee-line for the place where the discarded object had fallen. It took them only a minute to find it, and Worrals held it out for Frecks to see. It was a small, red, electric light bulb.

“What do you make of that?” she inquired.

“Nothing,” replied Frecks frankly. “Except that obviously he didn’t want it.”

Worrals held it up to the fast fading light. “The filament’s broken,” she announced. “It’s no good—that’s why he threw it away. I fancy I know what he was doing in the bunker.” She strode swiftly to it.

The sand had been smoothed out, but the place where it had been disturbed was revealed by a slightly different shade. Dropping on her knees

she pushed a little of the sand aside. An inch under the surface something appeared. It was another electric light bulb, but this one was fixed in a holder. "He must have replaced the globe—yes, that's what he did," declared Worrals breathlessly. She jumped up and ran to the next bunker. A moment's work revealed another bulb, just like the first. At the third bunker it was the same. "We needn't go any further," she said quietly.

"The fellow must play in the dark," murmured Frecks.

"He does—but not golf," answered Worrals in a curious tone of voice. She was rather pale. "Six red lights in a straight line and a fairway beyond. Doesn't that convey anything to you?"

Frecks screwed up her eyes in an effort to think. "No, I don't get it," she announced at last.

"You will," promised Worrals meaningly.

"When?"

"Perhaps to-night; if not, to-morrow night—or the next night. Come on, let's go to the village and get a bite to eat."

"We shall have to hurry or it will be dark before we get there," said Frecks.

"So much the better. Nobody will see us when we come back."

Frecks stared. "You mean—you're coming back . . . *here*?"

"I most certainly am. Come on."

Leaving the car where it was, they found a short cut to the village, and in the one shop-cum-café managed to get a cup of tea and enough food to stave the pangs of hunger. As soon as the meal was finished Worrals set off for the car to fetch their coats. This done, she led the way back to the hiding place in the bracken.

All this took some time, for the car was some distance from the village, and by the time they had got back to the fairway it was quite dark. The moon had not yet risen, but with the coming of night the clouds had dispersed and the stars gave enough light for them to see their immediate surroundings. The breeze died away, and the tree-tops came silently to rest. Nothing moved. The only sound was an occasional squeak or rustle somewhere in the woods close at hand, as nocturnal creatures pursued their prey.

Some time passed—perhaps half an hour. Frecks huddled more closely into her coat. "It's getting chilly," she whispered. "This may be your idea of

a fine way of passing a week-end leave, but it isn't mine. I'm getting the creeps."

"Sit still and be quiet; sounds carry a long way on a night like this," breathed Worrals. "In case you don't realize it, we're skating on pretty thin ice."

Another hour passed slowly; then, suddenly, she caught Frecks's arm. "Hark!" she ejaculated. From the far distance came a faint whoof-whoof-whoof, as of dogs barking.

"That sounds like anti-aircraft fire to me," said Frecks in a low voice.

"That's archie all right. Look! You can see it." Worrals pointed. Far away over the brow of the hill, tiny sparks of light, like fireflies, were twinkling in the sky. "It's coming this way, too," she added presently. "There go the searchlights." Beams of light were now stabbing the sky, quartering and scissoring as they quested for the raider.

For a little while the girls watched them breathlessly, then Worrals uttered a soft "*Ssh!*"

The reason for this warning was soon revealed. Two dark figures came down the fairway, running. They stopped almost opposite the place where the girls lay hidden, and, without speaking, worked swiftly.

With a shock, Frecks realized that they were doing something to one of the hooks that had puzzled them. Then the men separated, one running to the far side of the fairway, apparently to the other hook. It was not until that moment that she noticed something else higher up. A curious red glow was reflected on the tree-tops, an intermittent glow that appeared to come and go at regular intervals. She looked at Worrals to call her attention to it, but saw that she had already seen it.

Cupping her hands round her mouth Worrals leaned over to Frecks and whispered, "They're signalling to the raiders. The lights, being in the bottom of the bunkers, can only be seen from immediately overhead. That's why we see the reflection on the tree-tops."

When she looked back the two men had disappeared. At least, she couldn't see them. Nor could she any longer see signs of the raider; the anti-aircraft fire had died away and the searchlights had "dowsed."

"The raider must have turned back," whispered Frecks.

"It looks like it."

"What were those men doing with the hooks?"

Worrals shook her head. “I don’t know. I think they have gone—anyway, the lights have gone out. Let’s go and see what they did.”

Stiffly, the girls stood upright, and then began creeping along the edge of the clearing.

Suddenly Worrals pulled up dead. “Great heavens!” she choked. “I’ve got it. Look! There’s a line stretched across and there’s something hanging in the middle. It must have been put there for the raider to pick up—you’ve seen Army co-operation machines, fitted with special hooks, picking up messages like that at the R.A.F. display. I’m going to get that message.” She darted forward.

Then several things happened at once. The lights came on again. Simultaneously, an aero engine, which until that moment must have been throttled right back, burst into life; it was so close that Frecks cried out aloud. Two dark figures detached themselves from the trees and dashed towards Worrals, who had taken a flying leap at the message. The noise of the engine became deafening. It seemed to beat in great waves of sound on Frecks’s ear-drums. She saw the machine coming, a black shape streaking up the fairway. She screamed.

The rest was a blurred picture. She saw the aircraft shoot past, saw the men throw themselves flat to avoid being knocked down, saw Worrals leap aside. The aircraft zoomed upwards, the din receding with it. The men rushed at Worrals and caught her by the arms.

Frecks, gasping, dived into the bracken and lay still.

IN THE HANDS OF SPIES

WORRALS, in the grip of the two men, struggled desperately. "Frecks!" she screamed. "The message—take it."

Not until then did Frecks realize that Worrals had reached the message, and torn it from the line on which it had been suspended. She had assumed, not unnaturally, that the aircraft had picked it up. In answer to Worrals's urgent cry she dashed out into the open without really knowing what she was going to do. Actually she was far more concerned about Worrals than the message.

Worrals, however, thought differently. She saw Frecks coming, and with a shrill "Catch!" sent the message, which was a small, flat compact packet, skimming over the heads of her captors.

Frecks made a brilliant catch, whereupon one of the men made a dash at her. She eluded him by a twist of her lithe body and sped for the cover of the trees. Aware now in a vague sort of way that the packet was all important, and must not be allowed to fall into the hands of their enemies, she plunged on. It was, of course, pitch dark under the trees, but with her arms held out in front of her to protect her face, she struggled on. As she ran she could hear her pursuer blundering along behind her, cursing luridly. A rabbit hole brought her to the ground with a thud that knocked the breath out of her body; however, it gave her an idea, and without a moment's hesitation she pushed the packet as far down the hole as she could reach. Then she staggered to her feet and went on again.

Not until she saw the fairway in front of her did she realize that in choosing the easiest route she had travelled in a circle. Panting with excitement and exertion she did what was undoubtedly the wisest thing in the circumstances. She crawled into a bush on the edge of the fairway and lay still. Just in front of her Worrals was being held by one of the men; the other was still crashing about in the wood. She lay still, hardly daring to breathe.

The man in the wood soon abandoned his fruitless quest and returned to his companion. He seemed to be in a tearing rage. "She got away," he snarled. "It's pitch black inside the wood—can't see a thing. Don't worry,

I'll get her later on. She won't get far." He spoke with a strong foreign accent.

The other man swore. Turning to the wood he shouted, "Come on out of that!"

"Stay where you are," yelled Worrals. "They won't find——" She got no further, for one of the men clapped his hand over her mouth.

Frecks lay still.

"What are we going to do?" asked the first man.

"The lights have been cut off, so the machine won't come back," was the reply. "It's no use staying here. Let's get home. We'll take the girl with us. Bring her along. We'll find the other as soon as it gets light."

They set off down the fairway holding Worrals between them, and in this manner they walked about half a mile. Then they halted, and one of the men took a handkerchief from his pocket.

"Stand still while I tie this over your eyes," he grated. "You've seen enough as it is."

Worrals did not protest, knowing it to be futile. The handkerchief was folded and tied over her eyes, and thereafter she stumbled on blindly. She tried to form an estimate of the distance they covered, but she had no idea of direction. It was not very long before gravel crunched under her feet; presently a door was opened, and she heard a low mutter of voices. Moving forward again the warm atmosphere of a house greeted her nostrils. A few paces on soft carpet, a brief delay while another door was opened and a low conversation took place, and the bandage was taken from her eyes. For a moment she stood blinking in a glare of light, confusing after the utter darkness. Then she was able to make out her surroundings.

She was in a large, well-appointed room furnished as a library, lighted by two lamps, a reading lamp and a standard. On either side of her stood the men who had brought her there, but she took little notice of them; she was too concerned with a third man, a commanding figure who stood behind a great carved desk. He was dressed in a loose silk dressing-gown, with a white muffler tied round his neck. But it was his face that fascinated Worrals. At first she had a feeling that she had seen the man before; then she remembered the description given by the farmer of the man who had hired his field, the man named Corton or Coryton . . . tall, thin, middle-aged, with a large hooked nose . . . eyeglass, and a bit of a stoop. It fitted perfectly, all except the clothes. However, she gave no sign of recognition.

“What is the meaning of this outrage?” she inquired frostily, although she knew well enough, and realized that her position was perilous.

The man with the hooked nose ignored the question. “What were you doing trespassing on my property?” he demanded grimly.

“There was no notice that the land was private,” returned Worrals curtly.

For a moment a look of doubt clouded the man’s eyes, and she could guess pretty well what was passing through his mind. He found it difficult to believe that she, a mere girl, had discovered his secret by design, and not by accident. He was wondering if she had realized the significance of what she had seen, and did not want to ask questions that might arouse suspicion, if it did not already exist. It may have been, too, that he did not relish the idea of having on his hands a prisoner who certainly would be missed, and who might be traced to his property.

“She tore the line down and snatched the plans,” said one of the men, apparently to settle any doubts as to what the prisoner was doing. “There was another girl with her,” he added. “She got away with the papers, but she won’t go far. I’ve got men covering the wood.”

“She’d better not get away, either,” said the hook-nosed man in a tone of voice so threatening that Worrals moved uncomfortably. He turned to her again. “So you were spying, eh?”

“Spying? On whom?” inquired Worrals, resorting to bluff, in a wild hope that it might secure her release.

The hook-nosed man turned to his assistants. “How much did she see?”

“Everything,” was the emphatic reply.

“The lights?”

“She couldn’t help seeing them from where she was.”

The other nodded, and when he returned his gaze to Worrals her heart sank. She could see that her bluff had failed, and to pursue this course would be a waste of time.

“Who sent you here?” he asked crisply.

“Nobody sent me,” asserted Worrals, truthfully enough.

“Don’t lie to me. Are you asking me to believe that you came here entirely on your own account—that no one knew you were coming?”

“That is the truth.”

The man smiled, and in a flash Worrals understood the trap into which she had been led. She had as good as told the man that no one knew of her

whereabouts, consequently he could hold her prisoner with impunity.

“What is your name?” he inquired.

Worrals told him.

“Very well, Miss Worrals. I don’t know what brought you here, but you are old enough to understand that those who meddle in matters not their own, particularly at a time like this, usually live long enough to regret their indiscretion. I shall keep you here—at least, for the time being.”

“You would be well advised to let me go home,” retorted Worrals calmly.

“Presently you will go—but not home,” was the smooth answer.

“What do you mean by that?”

The man smiled faintly, a sardonic smile in which there was little humour. “When you leave here,” he said slowly, “it will be to go to a country where they know how to control impetuous young women like yourself.” He turned to the others, and with a casual wave of his hand, added, “Take her away. Put her where she will be safe.”

Rough hands closed on Worrals’s arms and urged her towards the door. Up three flights of stairs she was led, the last flight uncarpeted, and thrust into a small, unlighted room. The door slammed and a key turned in the lock. It was too dark for her to make out details, but groping about she found a bed and sank down on it, wondering how things were faring with Frecks. Perhaps it was as well that she did not know.

Frecks was, in fact, having a far more difficult time than she could have supposed. When she had bolted into the trees her action was purely instinctive, but as soon as she realized that Worrals could not escape she thought seriously of giving herself up—until Worrals’s warning cry advised her to remain where she was.

It threw her into a quandary, and she racked her brain desperately for a solution to the immediate problem. The idea of remaining hidden while Worrals was a prisoner was repugnant to her, but she had the wit to realize that she could serve no useful purpose by giving herself up; on the contrary, it seemed that her best chance of aiding Worrals was to remain where she was, until she could either go to her rescue with some hope of success, or fetch help. So she remained hidden.

A crescent moon had now risen above the tree-tops and flooded the scene with a wan light; she was glad of it in a way, but realized that it might be to her disadvantage in that it would make it difficult for her to move without being seen. And it was for this reason that she lay still even when

Worrals and her captors set off down the fairway. She had meant to follow them, but because of the moonlight she had to let them get some distance before she dared emerge from her hiding place. She allowed them to get about a hundred yards, and then, creeping out, started in pursuit, taking care to keep within the deep shade of the trees. For a little while she wondered if she ought to retrieve the packet which she had thrust down the rabbit hole, but in the end decided that it would have to wait. In any case, she doubted her ability to find it in the dark. She was far more concerned about Worrals.

An unexpected factor now arose to throw her plan out of gear. A curtain of cloud which she had not noticed suddenly blotted out the moon, so that the light failed. Naturally, this at once made her task more difficult, and more dangerous, for if she remained at a distance there was a likelihood of her losing her quarry, whereas if she closed the distance between them there was a chance that she would be heard, if not seen. Indeed, if the men stopped, she might even collide with them before she saw them. In the circumstances she did the most natural thing. She tried to lessen the distance between them without getting close enough to be in danger. To achieve this she increased her pace.

Now all this time her heart was pounding furiously, for her alarm had been acute. Her head was in a whirl. Breathing fast, she stopped to listen. Not a sound reached her ears, so she went on again, running now, blundering into obstructions and catching her feet in trailing briars. Once she fell into a bunker. Picking herself up she went on again, listening for any sound that might reveal the position of those in front of her. But silence, utter and complete, had fallen. The moon edged the cloud with silver for a moment, but all she could see was a lonely landscape. Nothing moved. "Worrals!" she cried frantically. There was no answer.

For a little while she stood still, aghast at the calamity and not a little frightened. Her brain raced, and she seemed to have difficulty in keeping her thoughts coherent. She wanted to do several things at once, run in several directions—towards the village, the manor, the aerodrome, the car—she knew not which. But most of all she wanted to scream for help; with difficulty she restrained herself, however, and took herself in hand. Fiercely, she asked herself what Worrals would do in such circumstances, and presently found the answer. She set off at a run towards the village, taking the short cut. Once she nearly trod on a large bird; it shot up under her feet with a whirr of wings that brought her heart into her mouth, as the saying is. Panting, she ran on, and gasped her relief when her feet found the hard road. As she entered the village street she heard a cottage clock strike ten.

She stopped, not knowing quite what to do next, for the street was deserted. With its windows blacked-out it seemed to be an abode of the dead. As she stood there, torn by indecision, she heard footsteps approaching. Hurrying towards them she came face to face with an old man; he was just turning into a cottage.

Frecks accosted him, trying to keep her tone casual. “Could you tell me where the village constable lives?” she asked.

The old man laughed shortly. “Lor’, miss, we ain’t got no police in here.”

“Where is the nearest?”

The old man thought for a moment. “I reckon as ’ow it ’ud be Constable Gaze, of Tedholme. This is on his beat.”

“Tedholme! But that’s miles away!” cried Frecks aghast.

“He’s the nearest, and I reckon you’d be lucky to find ’im at ’ome this time o’ night,” was the reply. “He’ll be out on his round. What’s the matter, miss—something wrong?”

Frecks thought swiftly, and saw that if she alarmed the village she might do more harm than good. Word of such an alarm would certainly reach the men who had seized Worrals before she did. That wouldn’t do. “No,” she answered, “nothing serious. Where is the telephone office?”

“I’m afraid we ain’t got one, miss—but I believe they’ve got one at the rectory.”

“Rectory!” Frecks clutched at the opportunity it presented like an exhausted swimmer clutching at a lifebuoy. “Where is it?”

The old man took her a little way down the road and pointed to the manor. “There it is.”

Frecks stared incredulously. “Is *that* the rectory?”

“Yes, miss. The Reverend Corton lives there.”

Frecks started. “What name did you say?”

“Corton.”

Frecks caught her breath. She wanted to think. She remembered the name—Corton or Coryton the farmer had said where Worrals had inquired about the grey horse. “I see,” she breathed. “Thank you. Good night.”

“Will you be all right, miss?” called the old man dubiously.

“Yes, thanks—I’ve got a car up the road,” Frecks told him.

She walked on quickly, for her mind was now made up. She would get the car and fetch help from the aerodrome—or else she would go to the advanced post and tell Bill Ashton what had happened. That would be better than going to the police. What did puzzle her, what she could not understand, was the name Corton in connection with the church. Had the old man said that a *Mr.* Corton lived at the manor she could have understood. But it now appeared that what they had taken to be the manor, with its private golf course, was the rectory. Could the name Corton be a coincidence? The name of the man who owned the first grey horse was, so the farmer had told them, Corton or Coryton. Here was such a name—but a parson . . . ? Frecks strode on, torn by doubt and uncertainty. She felt that she would look a fool if she led a rescue party to the rectory, only to find that the rector was all that he was supposed to be, and Worrals was not there at all. What then? She didn't know. She plodded on.

It seemed to be a long way to the car, much further than the last time she had covered the same ground. At a guess, she would have taken it to be about two miles, but now it seemed to be nearer four. To make matters worse, knowing that the men who had caught Worrals might be on the lookout for her, she often stopped to listen. Her eyes began playing strange tricks with her imagination, as can so easily happen in the dark, and more than once she crouched back, or made a detour, round what eventually turned out to be a tree-stump or gate-post. For a time she braced herself up with a hope that she might encounter the policeman on his round, but she might have been on the moon for all the signs of life she saw.

What with mental worry and physical weariness she was worn out by the time her aching feet took her to the car, which, to her unspeakable relief, was standing just as she had last seen it. With a little sigh of satisfaction she opened the door and flopped inside. She wanted to think, but such was her state of mind that this was by no means easy. Three facts stood out alone. The first was that the golf course, beyond all doubt, was being used by enemy agents; the second, that Worrals was a prisoner in their hands; the third, that she must fetch help without delay.

With this object in view she started the car. As it moved forward there came a report so close that for a moment she thought that she had been shot. A bumping wheel told her the paralysing truth, and it was with a moan of despair that she got out and examined it. There was no need to look twice. The tyre was flat. Projecting from the rubber was a piece of glass bottle which presumably had been left in the grass by a careless picnicker. Sick at heart at this fresh vexation she looked about for the spare wheel. She couldn't see one, and it took the best part of five minutes for the sinister

truth to sink in. There wasn't one. The bracket was there, but no wheel. The shock of this discovery was so intense, and her mortification so poignant that she nearly wept.

Miserably she surveyed the situation. She was miles from anywhere. Tired as she was already, she knew that if she started off on foot it would take her nearly an hour to get back to the village—not that there was much object in going to the village, for it was already asleep when she left it. Even if by an amazing stroke of luck she found some one to come back with her and repair the tyre, she doubted her ability to find her way out of the labyrinth of lanes in the dark, before morning. Whatever she did it would take her hours to get anywhere.

She got back into the car to think the thing over quietly, grateful at least for a comfortable seat. Almost at once she caught herself dozing, and started up in fresh alarm. That wouldn't do. She must keep on her feet, even if it meant walking back to the village, she decided. There was nothing else she could do. Or was there? A tingling sensation ran through her as she remembered the manor—or rectory, as it turned out to be. If Worrals was not there, she reflected, where else could she be?

Just when the idea of attempting a rescue on her own account first occurred to her she did not know. It did not come suddenly; rather did it emerge slowly from a wild sort of hope. She wondered why she had not thought of it before. She could at least look round the place; if she failed, she reasoned with herself, she would be no worse off than she was now. At the worst she would be captured, and even that carried some consolation, for she would at least be with Worrals.

Once the idea was firmly rooted she lost no time in putting it into action. She found the electric torch which she knew was carried in the car, and put it in her pocket; then, closing the door quietly, she set off across the heath, somewhat surprised to find that she was not as scared as she thought she would be. All the same, it was horribly lonely, and more than once, assailed by fears that she was being followed, she found herself glancing nervously over her shoulder. Naturally, she was tempted to switch on the torch, but she refrained, knowing that in a blacked-out countryside it could hardly fail to attract attention.

She felt better when she reached her objective and made a cautious approach. Seen from near at hand, it was a big, rambling barrack of a place, larger than she had thought, with extensive outbuildings. Not a glimmer of light showed anywhere, although that, in view of the black-out regulations, was only to be expected. Between dense rhododendrons that bordered the

drive it was so intensely dark that she could hardly see her hand in front of her face; but she crept on, feeling her way towards the vague silhouette of roofs and chimneys that she could see in front of her. Once, when a twig snapped under her foot with a noise that sounded as loud as a pistol shot, her heart nearly stopped beating, and her forehead moistened with perspiration. Recovering, she went on until she found herself at a corner of the house.

Now that she was clear of the shrubs there was enough light for her to make out the general lay-out of the place, and she began a cautious inspection of the windows, stopping sometimes to listen. More than once she thought she heard a faint murmur of voices somewhere inside the building, but she was not sure. Everything was quiet. She found a garage, or what she took to be a garage, at the side of the house. The doors were open, but she wasted no time on it, knowing that had Worrals been inside the doors would have been shut. She crept on, staring wide-eyed at the windows, upstairs as well as down, not quite sure what she hoped to find, or what she ought to do next.

She came to the front door, and pressed gently against the flap of the letter-box. A shaft of light shot through it and cast a bar of orange across the drive. She was actually stooping to peer through the slit, when, to her horror, she heard the sound of voices inside; at the same moment the lock clicked, and she heard the handle turn. After that her actions were purely instinctive. There was no time for thought. She jumped off the step and dashed to the garage. Feeling safe there she looked out, taking care to keep her body out of sight. A yellow glow flooded a lawn for a moment as the door was opened; in it she saw the silhouettes of two men. Footsteps crunched on gravel, and it took her a moment to realize that the men were coming towards the garage. Stiff with panic she backed inside and took cover behind one of the two cars which she could see dimly, praying that the men would pass on. Instead, they came into the garage. They were talking in low tones.

“All right, we’ll leave it at that,” said one.

As he spoke he struck a match to light a cigarette, and in the light of it his face was clearly revealed. Frecks saw the hard profile of an elderly man, a man with a slight stoop, and a prominent hooked nose. A monocle gleamed in one eye; then the match went out.

Numb with shock, Frecks could only remain where she was, her heart thumping, her lips dry. She heard a car door being opened, and the sound of someone getting in. The door slammed. A window squeaked slightly as it was lowered. A self-starter whirred, to stop abruptly as the engine purred into life.

Said a voice, “Good night, Corton. You’re sure it will be all right about the girl?”

“Yes,” was the reply. “We’ll send her across to Germany in the next plane.”

The car moved forward, filling the garage with fumes. The rear light glowed redly, and then disappeared from view. The sound of the engine faded into silence. Doors grated on concrete, and came together with a crash. A lock clicked. Footsteps crunched again on the gravel drive. Silence fell.

With her heart pounding like a piston, Frecks staggered forward and threw herself against the doors. She groped for the handle, pushing and pulling in turn. But the doors remained closed. She knew then they were locked—and she was on the wrong side of them. With a groan of despair she sank down on the running-board of the remaining car and buried her face in her hands.

FRECKS TO THE RESCUE

How long Frecks sat on the step she did not know. She was nearly sick with apprehension, not so much on her own account as for Worrals, whom she was now unable to help—or so it seemed. However, after a while despondency gave way to a feeling of irritation, to be followed quickly by one of anger, directed not only against the enemy agents—for she no longer entertained any doubt as to who or what the men were—but against herself for being so weak. Worrals, she knew, would not be so easily upset. What, she asked herself, would she do in these circumstances? The answer was not difficult to find. Clearly, the first thing was to see about getting out.

Switching on the torch but keeping the beam low, she examined her surroundings and saw that the garage was larger than she had at first supposed. It appeared to be not only a garage but also a workshop, for the far end was occupied by a bench, fitted with a vice and littered with tools. However, she was not concerned with them. She did, it is true, try to force the door open with a tyre lever, but finding that she made a lot of noise without achieving anything she soon abandoned this and looked round for an easier way out. It gave her a shock to discover that there were no windows, which struck her as odd, but further exploration revealed a skylight in the roof which served the same purpose. This skylight, she observed, on closer investigation, was blacked-out by a blind which was operated by a cord reaching nearly to the ground. She drew it, but this did not help her at all, although it allowed her to see the stars.

It did not take her long to realize that if she could not force the door, then the skylight provided the only possible exit. By climbing on the top of the remaining car, a big saloon, she found that she could just reach it with her hands. But this was not enough; she needed to be higher to push the light open. Looking round she found an empty petrol can. This she stood on the roof of the car, and was satisfied to find that it gave her all the height she needed, although she was somewhat precariously balanced.

To her great relief she found that the skylight opened easily, but as it was set in the slope of the roof and hinged only on one side, the difficulty lay in folding it right back without letting it fall; for if this happened, the two large panes of glass which it comprised would certainly break with a good deal of

noise. Very gently she lifted the skylight, which was in the form of a large flap, and, as it passed over the vertical, allowed it to sink slowly. As events proved, this required a trifle longer reach than she could manage, and in extending herself to the utmost, her insecure perch wobbled. Acting under the impulse of self-preservation she made a grab at the frame, hoping to steady herself—as indeed she did, but at terrifying cost. The flap slipped, and the whole thing came down on the roof with a shattering crash. At the same time the petrol can went over sideways and bounced to the floor with a bang and a clatter, leaving her swinging by the arms. Drop she dare not, for fear she should slip from the roof of the car and injure herself on the concrete floor. She did the only thing left for her to do; she dragged herself up through the opening and lay flat on the roof, quivering in an agony of suspense.

If she hoped that by some miracle the din had not been heard she was doomed to disappointment. Nor had she long to wait. The front door was thrown open and some men ran out—how many she could not see. She could only hear them, and that was enough.

Said one, obviously referring to the noise, “It seemed to come from the garage.”

Another agreed, and footsteps approached the building. Somebody tried the garage door. “No, it wasn’t here,” he announced. “The doors are still locked.”

Thinking about it afterwards, Frecks saw that this was quite a natural view to take; but at the time it amazed her that the men, because the doors were locked, should take it for granted that no one was inside.

“I suppose it wasn’t that girl?” said a voice.

For a horrible moment Frecks thought the speaker was referring to her, but almost at once realized that this could not be so. Obviously, they were referring to Worrals. This as good as told her that Worrals was there, and while she was still trembling with the excitement produced by this vital piece of information, she was furnished with even more. One of the men switched on a powerful torch and directed the beam to one of the upper windows of the house, a small projecting gable, immediately over the garage.

“No,” continued the speaker, “it couldn’t be. She’s all right. The window’s still shut. It’s barred, anyway, so she couldn’t get out.” The light was switched off.

“All the same, it sounded like breaking glass to me,” announced the first speaker.

“I thought so, too—probably a pane of glass falling out of the greenhouse.”

“That’s it,” agreed some one else, quickly. “An apple-tree has grown over it. Either an apple or a branch must have fallen through the glass—or maybe a cat jumped on it.”

To Frecks’s unspeakable relief the men seemed to accept this reasonable explanation, for they made their way back to the house. The door slammed.

Frecks rose to her feet and stood, somewhat unsteadily, on the sloping roof, looking about for a way down. The thing now, she decided, was to reach the ground, and from there try to find a way up to the window indicated by the man with the torch, to see if Worrals was, in fact, there.

As it happened, there was no need for this. Worrals had been seated on the bed when she, too, heard the crash of breaking glass, and crossed to the window to see what it was. The first thing she discovered was that the frame was barred, but this did not prevent her from opening the window, for it had been made to open inwards, presumably to admit fresh air. Pressing her face to the bars she looked down, and saw the men standing on the gravel drive. From her bird’s-eye view she also saw something else, something which they, being below, could not see. It was a figure spread-eagled on the garage roof. Not for an instant, of course, did it occur to her that it might be Frecks. Subconsciously she took the person to be a burglar.

For a moment it occurred to her to call out to the men that the intruder was on the roof, but then she dismissed the thought. Why should she help her enemies? The burglar wouldn’t harm her. Indeed, if, as was to be supposed, the man was British, he would be more likely to help her. So she closed the window quietly and watched to see what would happen next.

What happened was that a torch was flashed into her face, dazzling her. She closed her eyes and stood still. When she opened them again the light had been switched off. Watching closely she saw the little group of men move towards the front door, and guessed that they were going back into the house. As soon as the door had closed behind them she again opened the window, and by this time the figure on the roof was getting up. Then, not before, did she realize that it was Frecks, recognition being largely due to the skirt.

“Frecks,” she hissed.

Frecks nearly fell off the roof. Recovering herself she looked up. “Worrals,” she gasped.

“Ssh! Not so loud,” warned Worrals. “Can you get up to me?”

Frecks took one look at the thirty feet of sheer wall between where she stood and the gable, and promptly answered, “No.” She went on quickly, “The men said your window was barred. Is that right?”

“It is,” answered Worrals. “What’s that place you’re standing on?”

“The garage.”

“Are there any tools there?”

“Plenty.”

“Fine! Now, listen carefully,” went on Worrals swiftly. “I’ve got to get out of this or I shall find myself in a German concentration camp. Get back in the garage and try to find a file or a hacksaw. While you’re doing that I’ll be tearing one of the sheets into strips to make a line. I’ll lower it to you and you can tie the file on the end. If you can find a rope as well so much the better; if not, I shall have to knot the rest of the bedclothes together.”

“Okay, I’m on my way,” called Frecks in a hoarse whisper, and made for the skylight.

She was, of course, still confronted by the drop on to the top of the car, but now, with Worrals close at hand, she took an entirely different view of it. She crawled through the frame, lowered herself to arm’s length, and dropped. The car echoed like a drum as her feet struck the top, but she managed to keep her balance, and in another minute she was on the floor feverishly going over the tools in the light of her torch. As it happened there were two or three files on the bench, as well as a hacksaw. She took them all, and added a heavy tyre lever to the bundle, thinking it might be useful. She then looked for a rope, but here she was not so lucky. The nearest thing she could find was a coil of electric flex. It would be a bit thin to grip, she mused, but it was better than nothing; and, anyway, there was no fear of it breaking. She had rather a job getting everything on the roof, for which purpose she again had to call into use the petrol can. However, this time, warned by experience, she took infinite pains, and the can remained steady.

Looking up at the window she could just see Worrals’s face, pale in the dim light. “Okay,” she called.

A white ribbon fluttered down. Frecks caught the end of the improvised line and presently had the satisfaction of seeing the tools hauled up to the window, where Worrals took them in.

“How long is it going to take you to cut through the bars?” she asked.

“It will only be necessary for me to cut through one,” was the terse answer. “With a hacksaw it shouldn’t take me more than a quarter of an hour.”

“Go ahead,” hissed Frecks, and sat down to wait.

The saw made a disconcerting amount of noise as it bit into the metal, even though Worrals did her best to muffle it with a piece of material. Frecks watched the front door, wondering vaguely what the time was. She had lost all count. She wondered, too, if the men had gone to bed. The house was so quiet that it rather looked as if they had.

It seemed an age before the sawing ceased, and a sharp metallic click informed her that the bar had been removed. The flex uncoiled itself, the loose end falling with a thud on the roof.

“Here I come,” called Worrals, and a moment later was swinging in space.

Frecks held her breath for the next few seconds while Worrals made the descent. “Good work,” she choked, as a dark figure came to rest on the roof. The next instant they were gripping hands.

“Thanks, Frecks,” whispered Worrals. “I’ll do as much for you one day. Now let’s see about getting out of this. Have you still got the packet?”

“No.”

“What did you do with it?” asked Worrals quickly.

Frecks told her. In a few words she narrated the story of her visit to the village, and ended by saying that the car was out of action with a punctured tyre.

Worrals was aghast.

“If we’ve got to walk it will take us hours,” she declared.

“Does it matter?” queried Frecks.

“Of course it does. Don’t you see, in the morning the spies will discover that I’ve gone. They’ll take fright and bolt, and we shall lose them after all.”

“But we shall have put the tin hat on this signalling business.”

“That isn’t enough,” declared Worrals. “If they’re still at large they’ll only start again somewhere else. We’ve got to fetch the police and make them raid this place before the spies can get away. Speed is everything.”

“Yes, but how?”

“Is there a car in the garage?”

“Yes, there were two, but one’s gone.”

“One will be enough for us,” announced Worrals.

“But the doors are locked.”

“That’s awkward. No matter, we’ll either cut through the lock or take it off altogether. Let’s have a look at it, anyway.”

They dropped down into the garage, taking the petrol can with them. Worrals said they might forget it when they started off in the car, in which case it would probably fall off and make a noise. In the light of the torch they examined the lock on the door, which turned out to be a simple one.

“I’ll soon have that off,” promised Worrals. “Fetch me a screwdriver.”

A screwdriver was brought from the bench, and while Frecks held the light Worrals set to work to make good her promise. But she did not get far.

She had taken out one of the six screws that held the lock in place, and had just started on the next one, when she broke off, listening intently.

“Hark!” she breathed.

She had not been mistaken. Footsteps were approaching, and they were coming with too great a confidence for there to be any doubt as to their destination.

“They’re coming here,” breathed Worrals.

Frecks gave a gasp of dismay. “We’re sunk,” she muttered.

“Not yet. Get in the car—in the back, on the floor! They won’t see us there. Make it snappy—no noise!”

They just had time to get into the back of the car, close the door behind them and crouch below the level of the seat, when the garage was unlocked. Two men were talking in low tones, but what they said could not be heard, for the words were drowned in the scraping of the doors as they were dragged open. A horrible suspicion darted into Worrals’s brain, but she dare not express it, for the men were now too close.

She was unable to see anything, but she could tell from sounds pretty well what was happening.

The men—she judged there were two—came to the car.

“Curse that infernal girl,” said one. “She’s responsible for this. I was hoping to get an early night to-night. If I had my way I’d wring her neck.”

“You may get a chance later on,” said the other.

“The sooner the better,” grated the first speaker. “We run enough risks as it is, without taking unnecessary ones. I’d have finished her off right away,

then I should know she couldn't do any talking.”

“Hurry up and get in!”

The car rocked slightly on its springs as the driver got in. The other followed. The doors slammed. The starter buzzed, and almost before the girls had time to grasp what was happening the car moved forward into the night. It turned sharply as it swung out of the garage, and then cruised on down the drive.

Worrals prayed fervently that it would stop outside the front door of the house to pick up another passenger, for this would at least offer them a chance to make a dash for liberty. But in this hope she was doomed to be disappointed.

The car went straight on, gathering speed. Reaching the main road the driver put his foot down, and it shot forward.

Worrals moved slightly to a more comfortable position, for she knew that she must be nearly suffocating Frecks, who was underneath. However, she said nothing. Apart from the risk of talking there seemed to be nothing to say.

“It isn't as warm as I thought it was,” announced one of the men presently.

“Yes, it is a bit chilly,” agreed the other. “There's a rug in the back. We may as well have it out.”

THE PLOT EXPLAINED

IT would be difficult to describe Worrals's sensations as the driver calmly made his suggestion. All she could do was brace herself for the struggle which was imminent; and she had, in fact, started to put herself in a better position for defence when respite came in a manner unexpected.

"What's that in front of us?" said one of the men sharply.

"It looks like a cow," returned his companion, as the brakes were applied. "Why don't these confounded farmers keep their gates shut?"

The car then ran along slowly, the siren honking, presumably to scare the stray animal to the side of the road.

Now had Worrals been alone she would have seized this opportunity to jump clear; but what deterred her was her inability to inform Frecks of such an intention. She herself, if she acted quickly enough, might get clear, but she knew that the moment she opened the car door the men would turn their heads, and before Frecks—who, being underneath, was in a more disadvantageous position—could get clear, she would certainly be held. Nor dare Worrals speak, for to do so without being heard was manifestly impossible. But her brain was working swiftly, and she saw that there was still a chance. She groped for the rug to which the driver had referred, and found it on the floor. It was the work of a moment to drag it up, for, as it was neatly folded, it came clear without hindrance. She had just got it over her, and was, in fact, holding it up with her hands, when the car shot forward again, and the driver said, "Get the rug."

His companion reached over, more or less blindly, and with what relief Worrals felt the weight lifted from her hands need not be described. What Frecks—who, of course, knew nothing about all this—was suffering, she dare not think. All she could do was pat her reassuringly on the arm, in the hope that she would realize that the immediate danger had passed.

The car sped on through the darkened countryside.

Said one of the men after an interval of silence, "We shall have to be extra careful for a bit, after what's happened to-night. The boss is worried about that girl tumbling to the scheme—that's why he's hurrying things on. Apparently the daylight raid on the munitions dump at Churley was already

fixed for to-morrow morning, soon after dawn; there's no time to alter the arrangement, so we've got to get that circus horse in position before it gets light."

"Which one is it—the skewbald?"

"Yes. It should be waiting for us when we get there."

Conversation lapsed again, but the significance of what had been said had not been lost on Worrals. It was clear that the grey horse guide to the aerodrome was only part of the general scheme which involved other military targets, marked by animals of different colours—the munitions dump at Churley, for instance, which Worrals knew all about, for it was from this depot that "N" Squadron drew its bombs. A raid was timed to occur there in a few hours. Personal safety, therefore, became a matter of secondary consideration. Somehow, she knew not how, the raid had got to be frustrated.

A few minutes later one of the men said, "Here we are." The car turned sharply off the road, and after running slowly for a little way came to a stop. The men got out, and were at once greeted by someone who evidently awaited them.

"You've left it late, haven't you?" he remarked.

"Yes, we had a little trouble."

"You mean about that girl? I heard about it on the 'phone. Funny business. What does Corton think about it?"

"He doesn't know what to make of it, but he reckons that the girls—there were two of them on the links—were acting on their own account, in which case there's nothing to worry about. Is the horse ready?"

"Yes, it's here in the van waiting. It'll only take you half an hour to reach the field, so you're still all right for time. Come in and have a drink, and tell me about these girls. I don't like the sound of it."

There came the sound of receding footsteps. Worrals waited until they had gone some distance; then, raising her eyes to the level of the window, she looked out. She was just in time to see the figures going through a gate in a low hedge which separated the yard from the garden.

A short distance beyond, perhaps a score of paces from where the car stood, rose a large building of the farmhouse type. A dull yellow glow illuminated the framework of a side door as the men went in. For the rest, the car stood in a fairly extensive yard, surrounded on three sides by what appeared to be stables. Close at hand rested a motor horse-box.

“Come on, Frecks,” hissed Worrals, “we’ve got to get busy.”

“You’re telling me,” grunted Frecks, as she dragged herself to the seat. “Watch me run.” She started to open the door on her side.

Worrals caught her by the arm. “Not so fast,” she said tersely. “You heard what those men said about the raid on Churley? We’ve got to stop it. How long have we got?” She peered at the instrument board which, as she hoped, included a clock; but a little cry of alarm broke from her lips when she saw that it was five minutes to three. “We can’t do it,” she said bitterly. “The raiders will be over before we can get anywhere. We don’t even know where we are.”

“Let’s take the horse-box—that’ll stump them,” suggested Frecks hopefully.

Worrals shook her head. “That’s an idea, but it’s not good enough. In the first place, they’ve probably got another animal to replace it, and, secondly, they’d chase us in the car and catch us. As I see it, we’ve only one chance. That man who was waiting said he’d spoken to someone on the ’phone. That means there’s a telephone here. If we could find it, and put a call through to the Squadron, the boys could be up topsides waiting for the bombers when they arrive. That would be a much better way of dealing with the situation than putting the wind up these men by taking the horse.”

“But—but the telephone will be in the house,” stammered Frecks.

“Of course it will. That needn’t necessarily prevent us from reaching it.”

“But what a frightful risk.”

“It’s a risk worth taking. If we can only get word through to the aerodrome it doesn’t matter much what happens afterwards. Come on.”

They got out of the car, closed the doors quietly, and crept towards the gate in the hedge. Beyond it lay the garden. The fragrance of night-scented stock came up in waves and Worrals smiled at the incongruity of it. She went on towards the house, making for the side door through which the men had entered. Broadly speaking, the whole place was in darkness, but a chink of light at the side of a large bay window, from beyond which came a low murmur of voices, told where the conspirators had congregated.

“This way,” breathed Worrals, and went on to the door, which she thought would not have been locked. Nor was it. She turned the handle and slowly pushed it ajar. Beyond it lay a passage, dimly lighted by a candle that stood on a hall table. The sound of voices now reached them clearly, and moving nearer Worrals ascertained that they came from behind a door at the far side of a square hall into which their passage led. Her eyes made a swift

reconnaissance of the hall, hoping to locate the telephone, but it was not there. She returned to the passage, on either side of which were doors, two on one side and one on the other. She tried the single door first. The room beyond was in darkness, but she made out the fittings of a kitchen. She closed the door, and turning to the others noticed for the first time that a narrow shaft of light showed under one of them. "It might be here," she whispered. "It's probably the room in which the man was waiting when the car arrived." She opened the door an inch. Nothing happened. She pushed it again. Still nothing happened. She looked inside and saw that the room was unoccupied. A glance told her that it was a study, lighted by an oil-lamp which stood on a roll-top desk. On the desk, beside a litter of papers, stood a telephone. She dragged Frecks inside, closed the door and locked it.

"This is where we've got to keep our heads whatever happens," she said calmly. "The first thing is to find a line of retreat. Open that window." She pointed to a long, low window which, from its position, she knew must overlook the yard where the car was standing.

"But the light will show," whispered Frecks, who seemed slightly breathless.

"You needn't draw the blind except to open the window. Having got the window open we can bolt through it if anyone comes to the door. You stand there ready to make a dash if we're disturbed. Don't worry—it's safer than it looks."

"Pah! Don't give me that," drawled Frecks sarcastically.

Worrals now turned to the telephone, which was one of the old-fashioned sort—that is, without dialling apparatus. Her hand was already on the receiver when two things on the desk caught her eye. The first was an automatic, which lay in the manner of a paperweight on a sheet of tracing paper. This, she observed, was a tracing from an Ordnance survey map, but it had been decorated in a most remarkable fashion with spots of different colours. Looking closer she saw that these coloured areas were certain fields, but it was not until her eyes went instinctively to Churley that she realized what they implied. It was a small brown and white square at Churley that told her everything, for she had not forgotten the brown and white circus horse. In a flash she understood. The coloured areas were fields indicating the position of tell-tale animals. On the side of the map was a key in coloured inks, actually setting out the details of these animals. Thus, apart from the grey horses, and the skewbald, which she already knew about, a group of small black dots meant a herd of black Berkshire pigs; and there

were others. In some way or other every important aerodrome in the district had been marked.

Now up to this moment it had never occurred to her that the scheme was so vast, so thorough, so absolutely complete, and the shock of it made her feel weak. The map was, in fact, a key to the whole gigantic plot, a key that would be worth far more than its weight in gold to the British authorities—if she could get it to them. With it in their possession, in a stroke all the animals could be seized, and thus would be destroyed the whole carefully prepared stratagem. With hands that shook a little in spite of herself she folded the map, put it in an envelope which she took from a pigeon-hole, and, as an afterthought, in case she lost it, wrote Bill Ashton's name and address on the outside. This done, she put the envelope in her pocket.

“What on earth are you doing?” muttered Frecks. “Get on with the telephoning.”

Worrals wasted no time in explanations that could wait. She picked up the telephone and unhooked the receiver.

“Number please?” said the operator.

Speaking quietly Worrals gave the number of the aerodrome. “And, miss,” she added, “I'm an Air Force officer. Please give this call priority. It's a matter of life or death.”

After a few seconds, each one seeming like an eternity, the station operator spoke. “Royal Air Force, Bradchurch.”

“This is Flight Officer Worrals speaking,” answered Worrals. “Take this message—it's desperately urgent. In case I am prevented from finishing the call, inform the Commanding Officer that I have certain information that the Churley ammunition dump is to be bombed by enemy aircraft shortly after dawn. Have you got that?”

“Yes.”

“Now put me through to the advanced post. I want to speak to Flying Officer Ashton.”

“One moment.”

There was another brief but agonizing delay. Then the operator at the advanced post came through.

Said Worrals tersely, “This is Flight Officer Worrals. Get me Flying Officer Ashton quickly.” A horrible thought struck her. “Is he in the air?”

“I don't think so, but he's on vigilance duty, which means that he'll be standing by his machine.”

“Then get him—hurry.”

“Just a moment.”

Another ghastly delay, a full minute this time, and then Bill’s cheerful voice came over the line. “What is it, Worrals?”

“Thank God I’ve got through to you,” said Worrals fervently—and she meant it. “Now listen, Bill. Don’t interrupt, because I’m in great danger. You remember what I told you about the grey horses and the spy plot? Well, it’s true. Frecks and I have been investigating. Every aerodrome near here has been marked by conspicuous animals—grey horses, black pigs, and so on. The golf course where I shot down that Hun is a fake; there are lights in the sand bunkers which signal to enemy aircraft. Machines come down there and pick up messages—we’ve seen them. A raid has been timed for the Churley dump at dawn to-day. A man is on his way to put a skewbald horse in a field close to it. If you’re quick you might catch him in the act. You must do something about it. The spies caught us, but we got away; we’re now in their headquarters. They may discover us at any moment. I’ve got a plan of the whole scheme—if I can get it to you. I know! If all else fails I’ll post it in the nearest——”

At this moment voices were heard approaching, and a moment later somebody turned the door handle. There was an exclamation of startled surprise and the handle was shaken violently.

“Who’s in there?” called a voice sharply.

Worrals went on tersely, swiftly, “They’re here now, Bill. I must go.”

“Just a minute, kid.” Bill’s voice was crisp with alarm. “Where are you speaking from?”

Fists began hammering on the door. Men were shouting.

“I don’t know where we are,” called Worrals desperately. “We’re at some stables where the animals——”

“Look at the telephone,” shouted Bill. “The exchange and number should be on it.”

Worrals hadn’t thought of that. She looked down at the foot of the instrument and saw Laxbourne 601.

“I’ve got it!” she cried. “It’s——”

With a crash the door was burst open and three men rushed into the room.

THE VICARAGE AGAIN

FRECKS cried out, but Worrals remained silent. White-faced, she dropped the telephone and snatched up the automatic.

“Stand back,” she snapped.

The three men halted sharply.

“I’ll shoot the first man who moves an inch,” went on Worrals icily—and her voice sounded as though she meant it.

The men evidently thought so, for they remained motionless, tense, alert, like wild animals about to spring.

Worrals was curiously calm. “Frecks,” she said, without taking her eyes off the men, “are you still there?”

Frecks answered that she was.

“Good. Do exactly what I tell you. First, get the blind out of the way. Second, go to the car, start the engine, and turn so that you face the road. Leave the car door open, but stay in the driving seat ready to put your foot down the moment you see me coming. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead.”

The blind went up with a crash, and Frecks’s feet pattered across the yard.

One of the men started forward, but the automatic jerked to cover him, as menacing as the head of a snake about to strike.

“I said stand still,” rasped Worrals. “I’m only waiting for half an excuse to pull this trigger. If you doubt that, try something.”

Outside, the starter whirred, and the engine came to life. Inside the study an attentive silence reigned, a silence that was almost tangible in its intensity. Worrals could hear Frecks turning the car.

Presently came Frecks’s voice from the yard. “Okay,” she called.

With the automatic still covering the men Worrals began to back towards the window, feeling for it with her left hand. Her eyes, still on the men, were grim; her lips, a thin straight line.

Moving slowly but deliberately her questing hand found the window frame, then felt for the sill.

She knew that the most difficult part of the operation, that of getting through the window without taking her eyes off her enemies, would now begin. Still, she was unhurried. The pistol never wavered for an instant as she got one leg across the window-sill, then the other. Still facing the room she dropped to the ground outside. Then, suddenly, she slammed the window and raced for the car.

It was already moving as she reached it. As she flung herself inside and banged the door with a brittle “Tread on it, Frecks,” orange flame stabbed the darkness behind her, and a bullet ripped through the windscreen. Another shot was fired by a man who stood silhouetted against the open window, but beyond boring a little hole through the roof it did no damage. By that time the car was tearing down the drive.

“Steady at the turn,” warned Worrals. “We can’t afford to take risks.”

The warning was necessary, for Frecks was driving at a speed that was definitely dangerous. Even as it was, possibly because she was unused to such a big car, a mudguard scraped the gate-post as they shot through on to the road.

Frecks had yelled, “Which way?” for the choice of a left or right turn lay open to them.

“Either way,” answered Worrals, for the simple reason that she had not the remotest idea where they were, or where the roads led. In that respect they would have to trust to luck.

Frecks turned to the right and drove on, with Worrals looking through the back window. She saw dimmed lights speeding down the drive and knew that they were being pursued. “They’re coming after us,” she announced.

“What in—a horse-box?”

“I don’t know; I can’t see,” returned Worrals. “They may have another car.”

“I shall take some catching now,” declared Frecks warmly. “But if they do start to overtake us, shoot the blighters—have you still got the pistol?”

“You bet I have.”

“That’s swell. D’you know, I’m beginning to enjoy this,” asserted Frecks naïvely. “I’ve seen it scores of times on the flicks, but I didn’t dream I should ever get a chance of doing it myself. I wish we had one of those

howling sirens they use on the police cars in America. Phew! Would I make it howl?"

"You look where you're going," replied Worrals anxiously. "If we hit a tank trap or something, *we* shall be doing the howling."

For a few minutes after that nothing was said. Then, "How far are they behind?" asked Frecks.

"Some distance," Worrals told her. "I can only see their lights when we get to the end of a fairly long straight piece of road."

"I think we're coming to a village," announced Frecks, as she saw the outlines of a village sign, with the name, of course, obliterated. She told Worrals what she had seen, lamenting the erasion of the name as a precaution against enemy parachutists, for had they been able to identify the village it might have given them some idea of where they were.

Meanwhile Worrals was thinking fast. The information that a village lay ahead had reminded her of something. "If there's a village there should be a post-office," she said. "Slow down as you go through and watch for the post-office. I have a letter to post. You look to the right, I'll look to the left."

"Post?" echoed Frecks. "Jumping crocodiles! Can't you think of anything better to do at a time like this than fool about posting letters?"

"This is no ordinary letter," retorted Worrals. "It's the plan of the whole spy organization. I've addressed it to Bill Ashton. I'm going to post it—just in case of accident."

"What about stamps?" demanded Frecks. "I haven't any coppers."

"I shouldn't bother about them if you had," Worrals told her. "Bill won't mind paying the surcharge on this packet when he sees it—whoa! Stop. Here we are."

Frecks brought the car to a dry-skid standstill near the kerb.

Worrals jumped out, ran the few yards down the deserted street to the letter-box which she had seen in the wall of a small shop, took the packet from her pocket and pushed it through the slit. It dropped with a comforting *plop* inside.

She ran back to the car and got in.

"We might be able to get help here," suggested Frecks.

"And be overtaken while we were knocking on the doors—not likely," returned Worrals. "Go on—here they come," she ordered sharply as the headlight of the pursuing vehicle appeared at the end of the village street.

Their own car shot forward again, and was soon racing across open country. Worrals studied it, or what she could see of it, hoping to pick out a landmark that she could recognize; but there was no such clue.

They were approaching the brow of a long shallow hill when a red light appeared ahead. It seemed to be in the middle of the road.

“What’s that?” asked Frecks quickly.

Before Worrals could answer another red light appeared, waving to and fro.

Frecks uttered a cry of joy. “It’s a barrier!” she shouted. “It must be a Home Guard post. The troops will have rifles. We’re safe. Those men behind won’t dare to do anything now.”

Worrals’s nerves relaxed with reaction after the strain. “You’re right,” she agreed. “Thank goodness. We’ll tell the troops what has happened. Go slow, we don’t want to be shot.”

Frecks brought the car to a standstill in front of the barrier, which had been erected at a fork. It was a primitive affair, merely a telegraph pole resting on two trestles. A cottage stood a little to one side. As they wound down the windows two men in Home Guard uniforms appeared. One flashed a torch at the number-plate; then he opened a door and scrutinized the occupants.

“Identity cards, please,” he requested.

Worrals started. “Yes—er—of course. Have you got yours, Frecks?”

“No, I left it in my handbag, in your car.”

“I left mine there too,” Worrals told her. She turned to their interrogator. “It’s all right, soldier,” she said. “We’re——” She glanced behind and saw the headlight of the pursuing car coming up the road. “As a matter of fact we’re just having a spot of bother with some spies,” she went on quickly. “They’re after us—here they come now, in this next car. You’d better get all your men out, in case there’s trouble. These fellows are armed, so you’ll need your rifles.” She made this last suggestion because she noticed that for some unexplained reason neither of the Home Guards was carrying rifles, as is usually the case. Her voice became urgent as she saw the horse-box pull up behind. “Take care,” she said anxiously. “The men in that vehicle are dangerous spies.”

“That’ll be all right,” said one of the men. “Get out and we’ll see what they have to say about it.”

Worrals got out and Frecks followed. Together they turned to face their pursuers.

“Yes, those are the men,” declared Worrals. “Arrest them.”

Two men had dismounted from the horse-box. They came forward confidently. One of them laughed softly, an unpleasant grating sound.

“You’ve got them all right, I see, so there’s no need to ask if you got the telephone message,” he said.

“Yes, this seems to be the party,” returned one of the Home Guards casually.

For a moment Worrals did not understand. “What do you mean?” she cried in some confusion, swinging round to the man who had spoken. Not until she saw that they carried revolvers, which were pointing at *them*, not the spies, did she fully comprehend. Something inside her seemed to go down like a lift.

“What is all this about?” drawled Frecks.

“These men are not Home Guards,” Worrals told her bitterly. “They’re friends of those spies. They were telephoned to put a barrier across the road to stop us. They’re all spies.”

“Give me that pistol and I’ll shoot the beasts,” snarled Frecks viciously.

“I left it inside the car,” returned Worrals with the calm of despair.

“Ah, I was wondering what you had done with it,” said one of the men who had got out of the horse-box. He caught Frecks by the arm. “Come on, get back in that car,” he ordered harshly. “Inside, both of you. You’re going for another ride, but this time I’ll do the driving.” He pushed the girls roughly into the back seat, slammed the door and then turned to the two false guards. “All right, boys, you can take the barrier down now,” he said curtly. “One of you had better come with me to watch these girls while I do the driving. Joe will have to take the horse-box. Let’s go.”

He got into the driving seat. The man to whom he had spoken got into the seat beside him, but turned to face the girls, the muzzle of his revolver resting on the back of the seat.

“Any more trouble with you and you’ll get what’s coming to you,” he announced vindictively, as the car turned and set off back down the road.

“No doubt you think you’re very clever,” sneered Worrals, who was quivering with barely suppressed anger at the trap into which they had fallen.

“What’s so clever about you?” snapped the man.

“Nothing, obviously, or we shouldn’t be here,” answered Worrals.

“Then what do you mean?” demanded the man.

“You’ll learn,” Worrals told him evenly.

As she expected they were taken back to the farm from which they had just made their desperate escape. The horse-box, after following them for a time, turned off somewhere along the road, and she knew that it was going to keep its assignation with the skewbald horse at the ammunition dump. This, however, did not upset her very much, for she was sure that Bill and his friends would be able to deal with the raiders when they arrived. They were not taken to the study where she had found the map, but to the larger room where the conspirators had been talking while she had used the telephone. Corton was there, waiting, an evil expression on his face. Altogether there were four men, but it was clear that Corton was in command. They ranged themselves in front of the fireplace in the manner of a tribunal.

Corton wasted no words. Turning to Worrals, with his chin thrust forward at a threatening angle, he demanded, “Where is the map?”

Worrals returned stare for stare. “I haven’t got it,” she said frostily.

“Don’t lie to me,” snarled Corton. “I’ll have you searched.”

Worrals shrugged her shoulders. “Do so, by all means, but you won’t find the map. Should I waste my breath, lying, knowing that you can easily discover the truth?”

Corton touched a bell at his elbow. It was answered by an elderly, hard-faced, lantern-jawed woman with a colourless complexion.

“Search these girls and see if you can find a map on either of them,” ordered Corton. “Take everything out of their pockets at the same time.”

The woman beckoned, and the girls followed. There was nothing else they could do. They were taken to what was presumably the woman’s bedroom, where, regardless of Worrals’s repeated assertions that she was wasting her time, she carried out her orders—without, of course, finding what she sought. Her manner became aggressive towards the finish. She took her charges back to the dining-room.

“Did you find it?” asked Corton sharply.

The woman assured him that it was not in their possession. Corton crossed the room until he was standing over Worrals, glaring down at her. “Where is it?” he barked.

“Where you will never find it,” returned Worrals evenly.

He slapped her face. Worrals, taken by surprise, staggered. “How you’re going to pay for that one day,” she forced out through her teeth.

Corton continued his investigation. “Who were you ’phoning to, you little devil?”

“That’s something you may learn in due course,” Worrals answered shortly.

Corton turned to one of the men. “I suppose everything’s in order here, in case the police happened to call?”

“They’ll find nothing here,” replied the man addressed, presumably the occupier of the house.

“I hope you’re right,” said Corton tersely. “All right, we may as well get back.”

“What about these girls?”

“Well take them with us.”

After this there was a brief conversation carried on in tones so low that the girls could not catch what was said. They were then taken back to the car, which was driven by Corton to the rectory. The stars were paling in the sky by the time they reached it. Nothing was said until they stood in the hall, where the man who had driven the horse-box was waiting. He had been one of the two men who had pursued them to the barrier, and Worrals experienced a pang of disappointment that he had evidently managed to place the horse in the field and return safely.

“Did you get the map?” was his first question to Corton.

“No, Carl,” answered Corton gruffly. “They haven’t got it on them—we had them searched.”

The man named Carl frowned. “If they haven’t got it on them then they must have put it somewhere while they were on the road.” He snapped his fingers, as if inspired. “I’ve got it,” he cried. “The car stopped just after it ran into Rimpton village.”

Corton started. “I didn’t know that. Where did it stop—can you remember?”

“I should say it would be just about outside the post-office.”

Corton clenched his fists. “The post-office! That’s it. They must have posted it.”

The other laughed shortly. “Then all we have to do is to fetch it. The box is only cleared twice a day, at noon, and at six in the evening, so it will still be there.”

“Okay,” said Corton, in a relieved voice. “You’d better slip along and get it.”

There was a sardonic smile of triumph on his face as he turned to the girls. “I don’t think we shall need you any more,” he purred. Then, to the other men present, “Take them down to the cellar, and see they don’t get away this time.”

The girls were escorted down a flight of stone steps into a corridor, and thence into a cellar that led off it. A heavy door was slammed behind them, and a key grated in the lock.

“Well, here we are,” drawled Frecks.

“As you say, here we are,” agreed Worrals bitterly. “I don’t mind that, but it makes me savage that after all our trouble they’ve guessed what we did with the map. Still,” she added consolingly, “I couldn’t have done anything else. It would have come to the same thing if I had kept it on me.”

“That’s true,” admitted Frecks. “We did our best. What are we going to do now?”

“I’m going to sleep, even if it’s on the floor,” answered Worrals. “I couldn’t keep my eyes open another minute.”

HARD LABOUR

IN spite of their uncomfortable quarters both girls were soon asleep, for having been up all night they were tired to the point of exhaustion. How long they slept they had no means of knowing, but they were awakened some time later by a babble of excited voices upstairs.

“Something seems to be happening,” remarked Worrals, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

“You’re dead right, partner,” drawled Frecks. “I wonder how long we’ve been asleep?”

“A long time, I fancy,” returned Worrals, listening to the noise upstairs. “What on earth is going on?”

They were soon to know. The door was flung open and one of Corton’s men appeared, holding an electric torch. They noticed that he was dressed in a smart chauffeur’s uniform.

“Come on out of that,” he ordered brusquely.

The girls, by no means loath to leave their insalubrious quarters, followed him along a short corridor and up the stairs into the house, and thence to the library, where visible signs of the commotion were not lacking. Standing behind the desk was Corton, clad in the sombre garments of a clergyman. Near him, in addition to the chauffeur, were two other assistants, both dressed as members of a normal household, one a butler, and the other a gardener. But Worrals paid little attention to them. She was staring at what hitherto she had seen only in pictures—two officers of the German air force. Both were in uniform, but carried over their arms light dungaree suits which they had evidently just taken off. One had a black eye and a cut lip; the other held a bloodstained handkerchief to his cheek. Without being told Worrals knew that they were the victims of a crash.

Said Corton, in English, although he addressed the Germans, “These are the people responsible.” Then, to Worrals, he said harshly, “When you were using that telephone last night did you call up the Air Force?”

“Why?” inquired Worrals evenly. “Did your friends with the swastika decorations encounter unexpected opposition over Churley?”

Corton's lips tightened. "Then you did?" he grated. "A squadron of Spitfires was there."

"Good," returned Worrals calmly. "I'm gratified to know that my effort wasn't wasted."

"How did you learn about it?" asked Corton curiously.

"There's no secret about that," Worrals told him. "I overheard two of your confederates discussing it."

"That must have been in the car," put in one of the men concerned. "We weren't to know they were in the back," he added by way of excuse.

Corton looked at Worrals from under knitted brows. "I will see to it," he said slowly and distinctly, "that you get an equally warm reception when you get to the place where I am going to send you. You'll give no further trouble after that."

Worrals said nothing. She began to understand what had happened. The German bombers had been intercepted by Spitfires, and one of them at least had been shot down. The crew, or two members of it, had managed to reach the rectory, which meant that they must have been aware of its nefarious nature. A faint smile crossed her face at the success of her plan; but her eyes were busy and they noted certain objects on the desk, objects which she thought might serve a useful purpose if she could secure them. At the moment this was not possible, but she kept the idea before her in case an opportunity should occur. She wondered vaguely why they were being kept in the room, instead of being sent back to the cellar, for the interview appeared to be closed.

Corton drummed on the desk with his fingers. "Carl is a long time," he muttered.

"Yes, he's had plenty of time to get there and back," answered one of the others. "This sounds like him coming now."

A car came racing up the drive to stop outside the front door with a rasp of tyres on gravel. A door crashed, and a moment later Carl burst into the room. His face was pale; his manner was agitated, and his expression distraught. Looking at Corton he panted, "We've got to get out."

"What's wrong?" rapped out Corton.

"Joe has been arrested at the stables. The police are there."

"How do you know?" Corton fired the words out like pistol shots.

"I called there and nearly stepped into a trap," declared Carl. "Give me a drink." He picked up a decanter, but Corton grabbed his arm.

“Keep your head, you fool,” he rasped. “Did you get the map?”

Carl threw the girls an evil look. “Get them out of the way and I’ll tell you about it,” he growled.

With what interest Worrals listened to this conversation can be imagined, but she couldn’t quite understand it. Evidently the police had raided the stables, but that she had been responsible for this she could not believe, for she had not had time to tell Bill Ashton the telephone number, much less the address, even if she had known it—which she did not.

The men came towards her and she gave up hope of getting the things she wanted from the desk; but her chance came a moment later in an unexpected manner. From outside came the deep-throated roar of an aircraft, flying low. Instinctively there was a general move to the window to inspect it. Worrals took a quick pace nearer to the desk; her hands reached forward, then back. When Corton looked round, as he did a moment later, she was standing in her original position.

“Is this a friend of yours?” he inquired sarcastically, jabbing with his thumb in the direction of the sky.

Worrals went nearer to the window and saw a Spitfire circling. “Probably,” she answered casually, watching the machine turn and fly back over its course. Actually her heart was thumping wildly, for she hoped it might be Bill Ashton; but the machine was too far away for her to identify. She derived some comfort from the fact that a British machine was so close.

“Take a good look,” sneered Corton. “It’s the last you’ll see of him.”

But it seemed that Carl’s anxiety was not so easily allayed. “There you are, what did I tell you?” he said, pointing to the aircraft. “We’re being watched.”

“Rubbish,” snapped Corton. “There’s no connexion between the stables and this place.” He thought for a moment. “All the same,” he went on, “if this machine hangs about we’d better get out. Some of you go down to the links and pick up the electrical equipment; then, if the police come here they’ll find nothing. Gustav should be here to-morrow with the big machine. All right, get the girls out of the way. We’ll take them with us when we go.”

“Do you mind if we have something to eat?” requested Worrals. “Or is it the practice of you Nazis to starve your prisoners to death?”

“Take them away and give them some food,” said Corton to the chauffeur.

The latter took them back to the cellar and locked them in.

As his footsteps receded Frecks remarked bitterly, “Well, we didn’t get much change out of that.”

“Did we not?” returned Worrals sweetly. “We’ve certainly put a spoke in their wheel at any rate. And take a load of this—as they say in your precious flicks.” A match flared in the darkness.

“Matches,” gasped Frecks. “Where did you get them?”

“They were on Corton’s desk.”

“Brilliant. I didn’t see you snatch them.”

“You were too busy looking at the aircraft like the rest of them. You won’t guess what I grabbed in the other hand.”

“What is it?”

In the light of the match which was still burning, Worrals opened her hand to expose a long, slim nail file.

“Say!” cried Frecks. “You ought to have been a pick-pocket.”

Worrals smiled. “I seem to have a natural flair that way, don’t I? But this is no time to bandy compliments. We’ve got to get busy, or we’ll likely find ourselves enjoying Nazi hospitality for the duration, and that, I don’t mind telling you, doesn’t exactly fill me with enthusiasm. You heard what Corton said about a machine coming. His idea is to put us in it and send us to Germany—but it isn’t mine. Frankly, I can’t quite understand what has happened—this business of the police raiding the stables. Corton said he’d nothing to fear if the police came here, but I caught a look in his eye when he said it that leads me to think he’s not as happy as he pretends. He’s wondering how much I said on the telephone. Then there was the Spitfire. Was that Bill, I wonder, or was it just a coincidence; after all, there are plenty of Spitfires about. And what about the plans?”

“I don’t believe they got them,” said Frecks thoughtfully. “If they had they’d have swanked about it in front of us—they couldn’t have helped themselves.”

“But if Carl didn’t get them, why didn’t he?”

“Obviously, because they weren’t there.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” protested Worrals. “Just a minute though. By jove! I believe I’ve got the answer.” Worrals’s voice dropped to an excited whisper. “I told Bill I’d post them. I couldn’t tell him where, but when the men burst in I dropped the receiver—that is, I didn’t hang it up. Bill might have heard what happened in the room. In any case he could have traced the call. That’s it! He put the police on the track and they’ve raided the stables.

After what I said about posting the letter Bill would either make for the nearest post-office, or tell the police. He knew we were trying to escape, and when we weren't found at the stables he'd assume we'd got away. But when we didn't turn up he wouldn't know what to think, but I know what he'd do. He'd get into his machine and fly down to the golf course to have a look round. That must have been Bill in the Spitfire. If we could get out of this perishing dungeon we could signal to him. Let's see about getting out. Stand fast while I count the matches. We can at least explore the place now. I only wish I knew what the time was."

There was a short silence, broken by the rustle of the matches. "Twenty-one," she announced. "That's pretty good, but we can't afford to waste any. Perhaps we can find some paper that would serve as a torch. Let's look." Another match flared. She held it to the very end, and in its light they made a swift survey of their cell. It was disappointing, and Worrals did not attempt to hide it. There was nothing likely to burn except a single piece of flimsy paper that looked as if it had been used to wrap up a bottle. For the rest, the cellar was about fourteen feet square, and absolutely devoid of furniture. There was no window. The only aperture was the door.

"It looks as if it will have to be the door," announced Worrals, feeling her way over to it. "Here, you hold the matches. When I say the word, strike one, and I'll give it the once-over."

This she did, and found that it was fastened by a single lock of old-fashioned type. Probing in the keyhole with the nail file she ascertained that the key had been left in on the outside. Frecks was inclined to be downcast, but Worrals was unperturbed.

"We've only got to saw through the locking bar," she declared.

"Only!" cried Frecks. "With a nail file? Why, it would take three weeks."

"Three hours more likely, if we stick to it."

At this juncture operations were interrupted by the arrival of two men, one carrying a tray of food—bread, margarine, cheese, and a carafe of water. The other carried a lamp in one hand and a small card table in the other. From his pocket he took a short piece of candle which, after lighting, he placed on the table. The men then withdrew.

"Good," exclaimed Worrals. "That piece of candle should last half an hour, so let's make the most of it. I'll start sawing while you eat. When you've finished, I'll eat while you saw. That will save matches." Without more ado she inserted the saw between the door and the frame and set to work.

“How do you propose to get out of the house after you’ve got the door open?” inquired Frecks, with her mouth full.

“One thing at a time is an old motto, but a good one,” returned Worrals, sawing away at the brass bar which crossed from the lock itself to the slot on the opposite side.

By the time Frecks was ready to relieve her she had made some progress. A narrow groove had been cut in the bar about an eighth of an inch deep. The bar was about an inch deep and a quarter of an inch wide.

Frecks took her turn with the file while Worrals demolished in short time the remains of the frugal meal. After this they relieved each other at intervals that became shorter as their fingers showed signs of blistering. In this way an hour passed—or as near as they could judge—by which time they were nearly half-way through the bar. But their efforts were not so vigorous as they had been at the beginning; their wrists ached, and, moreover, both edges of the file had become blunt. The candle, too, had expired, and they had to work in the dark.

“Haven’t you *any* idea of the time?” asked Frecks once, after a long period of sawing.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea,” Worrals told her frankly, and went on with the work.

At the end of what seemed like several hours, although it was probably not more than two, they were three-quarters of the way through the bar; but the work was becoming slow, and the file had been worn almost smooth. Frecks was secretly amazed at the dogged determination of her friend.

“You’d have made a good partner for Jack Sheppard,” she observed whimsically.

“Not me,” declared Worrals emphatically, without pausing in her work. “I’m afraid I should have hit him on the head with a spanner or something. Every time he got out of jail the fool got drunk and was thrown back in again.”

“If we get away this time Corton will think the British are hard to hold.”

“They are,” grunted Worrals, shifting her stance for a fresh grip.

“When Corton finds we’ve gone he’ll be sore.”

“If he’s half as sore as my fingers are I should say he’ll be sick,” muttered Worrals. “After this I shall shudder every time I see a manicure set. Come and have a go—we’re nearly through.”

To Frecks fell the honour of finally severing the bar. Dropping the file she surveyed her fingers ruefully in the light of a match. They were a mass of blisters. So, too, were Worrals's, but such was their elation when they found that the door opened easily that they felt no pain. A count of the matches revealed that eleven remained.

"Now, where do we go?" inquired Frecks.

"I'll be able to answer that better when we've made a reconnaissance," replied Worrals, advancing warily through the doorway into the corridor.

In the light of another match they were now able to examine the situation of their cell for the first time, and found that it was one of two or three similar compartments. Opposite to them steps ascended to the ground floor of the house. Up these they now made their way, only to discover that the door at the top was locked; moreover they could hear someone moving about in the hall into which it opened.

"I didn't reckon on that," admitted Worrals. "Never mind. Let's go back. There may be a basement window."

She said this with far more hope than confidence, but as there was nothing else they could do she thought they might as well try it. The cellar next to their own was empty, except for a number of straws in which bottles had been packed. She picked one up, and finding it dry, lit it. "Bring some along," she told Frecks. "They'll serve for torches and save the matches."

The third and final cellar was the smallest, but there was no window.

"Well, that's that," observed Frecks philosophically.

"Just a minute," retorted Worrals. "What have we here?" She dropped on her knees and pointed to the floor about her; it was strewn with dozens of dead matches. "This place has been used an awful lot—and recently," she continued. "Why, I wonder? Bring the light over here." She followed the trail of matches to a tall wine cupboard.

"Somebody must have struck matches when they came to fetch wine," suggested Frecks.

Worrals shook her head. "They didn't fetch wine out of this bin. It's old, and it's rotten; besides the compartments are thick with cobwebs. This hasn't held wine for years—but the matches are new." She seized the side of the cupboard and pulled, and nearly went over backwards when it swung back on well-oiled hinges. Behind it was a tiny arched door, strongly built, decorated with an enormous iron handle in the form of a ring. There was no keyhole.

"Ah-huh," grunted Frecks.

Worrals took the iron ring in both hands prepared to find it difficult to turn, but to her surprise it lifted easily and turned noiselessly. The door swung open disclosing a narrow subterranean tunnel. She turned questioning eyes to Frecks.

“This is the way we go,” she murmured. “I don’t know where it leads to, but we’re going; the signs suggest that the place is used regularly; we’d better be prepared for anything. Bring your nerve with you—you may need it.” Taking the matches from Frecks she led the way into the passage.

UP THE TOWER

THE tunnel went on and on, and on, with the floor sometimes dropping and sometimes rising. In the low places, the walls dripped moisture, and gave birth to hideous growths of fungi. The air was stagnant and heavy with a dank, musty smell.

Worrals stopped and turned wondering eyes to Frecks. "This has got me guessing," she announced. "I reckoned it wouldn't go beyond the garden boundary, but we must be far outside it. The trouble is, I've no idea in which direction we're travelling."

"Go ahead," requested Frecks. "I'm no good for this sort of thing. If you see any toads you'd better warn me, because I'm liable to shriek!"

They went on again, and Worrals lit the last straw. "If we have to come back this way we look like doing it in the dark," she announced cheerfully.

Frecks shuddered. "Lead on, and forget the wisecracks," she said crisply. "This is neither the time nor the place for levity. I'm getting the heebie-jeebies."

Worrals went on, and soon afterwards saw the ground rising in front of her. "I believe we're getting somewhere at last," she threw back over her shoulder.

The passage ended at a door similar to the first, but there was a key on the inside, which tended to confirm her opinion that the passage was being used by those in the rectory. She listened for a moment and then opened the door, and in the dim light of the expiring straw looked about her in amazement.

Frecks had followed her. "Why," she whispered, "it's a vestry. Great Scott! We must be in the church."

"Then let's see about getting out of it," declared Worrals, advancing quickly to a heavy oak door, decorated with iron studs. She turned the handle and pushed. "It's locked," she muttered. The light went out.

Frecks groaned. "Then it looks as if we're sunk."

"A vestry usually has a window," returned Worrals, and struck a match.

In the feeble light she saw that she was correct. There was a window, but it was a mere slit high up in the stone wall, and obviously too small to permit the passage of anything larger than a cat.

“So what?” asked Frecks wearily. “It looks to me as if this is where we start back down the long, long trail——”

“Just a minute,” broke in Worrals, who had noticed a small oil-lamp on the table. She lighted it. “That’s better,” she said. “I’d have you know that we are down to five matches, and——” She stopped abruptly, staring at the window. “Good heavens,” she cried, “it’s dark outside. It must be night.”

“It usually is dark at night,” Frecks reminded her.

“Yes, but . . . we’d better try to work this out,” muttered Worrals. “We started on Saturday afternoon. On Saturday night we were captured, then escaped. . . . Why, d’you realize that we must have slept most of Sunday? It’s now Sunday night. Our leave expires at eight o’clock to-morrow morning. In other words, we’re due back at the aerodrome in a few hours.”

“That’s fine,” asserted Frecks. “Let’s go.”

“It’s late,” went on Worrals. “A service must have been held in this church this evening, but since everyone has gone it’s obvious that it must be after eight o’clock—hello, what’s this?” She broke off, staring at yet another door, one so small that it had previously escaped notice. It was the work of a moment to open it, to disclose a narrow spiral staircase winding upwards.

“That goes up to the tower,” said Frecks. “Since we haven’t wings there doesn’t seem to be much point in going up.”

Worrals swung round. “I’ve got it,” she said excitedly, pointing to more used matches that lay on the bottom step. “Corton uses the passage to get to the church when he doesn’t want to be seen. Then he goes up to the tower. I’m going to find out why.” Lamp in hand, she set off up the steps.

The stairway seemed endless, and more than once the girls had to stop to get their breath. During such an interval Worrals looked through one of the several narrow slits in the outside wall, apertures which, had it been day, would have lighted the staircase; but as it was now dark all that could be seen were the stars and a vague panorama. Presently they came to a large square belfry.

Before Worrals was properly in the room, she had staggered back with an involuntary cry of alarm, for her entry had created an extraordinary medley of sounds, croaks and flappings. Recovering herself she held up the light. “It’s all right,” she said in tones of relief. “What a fool I am. It’s only birds—jackdaws or something. They’ve gone out through the windows.”

They went on into the belfry where for some minutes they stood staring about them in mute amazement, for what they saw, while not unnatural, was hardly what they expected. To start with the floor was piled high with twigs, vast pyramids of them, which they presently realized were jackdaws' nests, built one upon the other through the centuries. On the wide sills of the two unglazed windows were more nests. On every beam, and there were many, there were still more. It appalled Worrals to think of the astronomical number of journeys that must have been made by the birds to bring together such an accumulation.

Holding the light aloft she saw some distance above their heads a bewildering array of massive timbers on which two great bells were hung. From each a thick rope depended, and disappeared into the tangle of twigs, to end somewhere far below. Worrals pointed to a ladder fixed perpendicularly against the wall.

"That's the way up to the top," she said, and crunching across the twigs started to mount it.

Frecks stood still, staring upward. "What beats me," she said slowly, "is that the birds must stay here sitting on their eggs during the frightful clamour when the bells are ringing."

"Think about that some other time," pleaded Worrals. "Come on, let's see what's at the top."

She went on up the ladder with Frecks at her heels.

The ladder was longer than she expected, and proceeding on past the two bells ultimately ended at a small trap-door. She put her hand in the middle of it and pushed. It gave easily and fell over with a clatter, leaving a square hole through which the stars twinkled. Another minute and she was through, to find herself standing on a leaden roof, about twelve feet square, surrounded by a low castellated wall. She extinguished the light, and put the lamp on the floor. Frecks joined her, and for a few seconds they contemplated in silence the dark landscape that rolled away on all sides as far as the eye could see. Then Worrals walked cautiously to the parapet and looked down. She caught her breath sharply and drew back.

"That doesn't look so good," she muttered. "It's a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more. Look, there's the village over there. I doubt if we could make ourselves heard by shouting. There's nobody about, anyway. How dark everything is. I don't think I quite realized before what the black-out meant." She pointed. "You can just see the rectory. I think it's fairly clear why Corton pretends to be a parson. Just look at the view; imagine what it must be like in daylight; one would be able to see twenty or thirty

miles in every direction. A man could sit up here and watch troop movements over half the county, and signal the positions to the enemy.”

“What’s to prevent anybody coming up here—I mean any ordinary person—any day?” queried Frecks.

“Home Office regulations. I have an uncle who is a parson, so I know that no one is allowed up church towers in wartime. What’s this over here?” She walked towards a long cylindrical object that stood a little to one side, mounted on a tripod and covered with a piece of mackintosh sheet. She laughed shortly when she reached it. “A telescope, eh?” she murmured. “Well, I don’t think we need wonder why that is here. What on earth are you doing?”

Frecks had dropped on her knees and seemed to be groping at something in the middle of the floor. “There’s an electric bulb here—several, in fact,” she answered in an excited voice.

“That will be more signalling apparatus,” said Worrals confidently. “A light up here couldn’t be seen from below; it could only be seen from above—which is all Corton needs.” Her voice became serious. “We’d better not stay up here any longer. We may be missed at any time, and the hunt for us will start. We’ve got to find a way out. Hark!” She stiffened, and swinging round stared fixedly towards the south whence came the distant but unmistakable sound of anti-aircraft gunfire. She caught Frecks by the arm as a searchlight on the horizon flung its ghostly finger into the sky. Another joined it, another, and another, until the whole length of the southern sky was ablaze with the quivering beams. Then, also far away, came one of the most sinister of all sounds—the quavering wail of an air-raid siren.

“Enemy aircraft,” said Worrals in a brittle voice. “I wonder if they’re coming this way.”

Hardly had the words left her lips when, almost at her feet, a light flashed. It was so unexpected that it startled her and she sprang aside with a cry of alarm. The light went out. But not for long. It was followed almost immediately by a regular sequence in different colours from a cluster of bulbs—red, red, green, yellow . . . red, red, green, yellow . . .

“If that’s Corton’s call-sign we’ll soon put a stop to it,” snapped Worrals, and whipping off her jacket she flung it over the bulbs. “Now see if you can find out where you are,” she went on coldly, addressing the sky.

“There’s a Hun coming this way,” announced Frecks presently. “He’s at a tremendous height, but I can hear him. There’s no mistaking those Junkers’ engines.”

“I can hear him,” agreed Worrals.

They stood tense, listening for some minutes.

“He’s circling,” continued Worrals, “and I know why. He’s looking for the lights we’ve just smothered. He knows they ought to be somewhere about here, and he can’t understand why they don’t show up. You know, Frecks,” she went on earnestly, “this is a far bigger thing than I thought when we started. It’s really serious. We’ve got to let the authorities know about it or die in the attempt.”

“*Ssh*,” warned Frecks suddenly. “I can hear voices . . . over this side . . . it sounds like somebody outside the rectory.”

They both went to the parapet and looked down. At first they could see nothing, but after a little while they could just make out a number of figures near the front door, tiny black dots on the drive which, from their height, looked like a carelessly dropped grey ribbon. A low mutter of conversation floated up to them, but they could not catch the actual words.

“I should say they’re wondering why the Hun doesn’t answer their signals,” whispered Worrals. “Not knowing we’re up here they assume the signals are working properly. There is this about it, they haven’t missed us yet.”

Frecks looked up. “The old Hun is beetling off,” she breathed. “He must have got fed up looking for the place.”

“That’s it,” agreed Worrals in a low voice. “Or is that the reason why he’s going?” She pointed towards the west. “Here comes another machine. It’s carrying navigation lights so it must be one of ours. It sounds like a Merlin engine, too.”

For a few moments they watched the interceptor coming towards them; then Worrals started as an idea struck her. “Gosh! I wonder if we could get into touch with it,” she hissed. “In a lonely place like this a light would show up like a beacon. I’m going to try.” She whipped up her jacket, but the lights were no longer winking. With fingers that trembled slightly she used another of the precious matches to light the lamp. Then, with the jacket she still held, she began making passes over it. But the interceptor roared on, banking away to follow the German machine, the position of which was roughly marked by converging searchlight beams.

“It’s no use,” said Frecks, hopelessly. “The light isn’t bright enough. If we could only catch the pilot’s eye we could send an SOS. I’ve got it! What about lighting a fire?”

“Yes, we might,” replied Worrals dubiously. “But it sounds a dangerous business to me. All the same, if we’re going to do anything it will have to be done quickly. Slip down to the belfry and get a handful of twigs.”

By the time Frecks returned Worrals knew that the chances of attracting attention were practically nil, for the interceptor was now heading away from the spot, and unless the pilot looked downward and behind him, which was hardly likely, no fire that they could light would be seen. Still, in sheer desperation, Worrals lighted a few of the twigs. For a moment they spluttered fitfully, and the fire looked like going out. In the hope of saving it she threw the rest of the twigs on the smouldering heap, and dropping on her knees blew into it. The result exceeded anything she could have hoped for, and she gave a cry of alarm as flames leapt fiercely upward.

“Look out! You’ll have the whole place on fire!” cried Frecks shrilly.

Worrals was already stamping on the fire in a frantic endeavour to put it out. She forgot all about the interceptor; she forgot the men standing outside the rectory; in fact, in her urgent efforts to extinguish the flames she forgot everything. After a little while she got them under control, and the rest was easy.

“I thought I’d done it that time,” she gasped.

“You’ve done it all right, don’t worry,” returned Frecks sarcastically.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you suppose the men below are deaf as well as blind? They’ve seen us—at any rate, they’ve seen the flames. I heard one of them shout. You probably didn’t hear it because of the row you were making.”

Two short paces brought Worrals to the parapet. Resting her hands on it she looked down. Instantly a volley of exclamations told her she had been seen. She saw the men make a rush for the house.

“That’s torn it,” muttered Frecks, who had witnessed what had happened. “They’ll go to the cellar, find we’ve gone, and know that we’re up here. They’ll be up here after us before we can get down. I wish to goodness I had a hammer; with anything like a weapon we could hold this trap-door until daylight.”

“Wishing won’t help us,” muttered Worrals. “Just a minute, let me think.” She clapped her hands to her head. “I know! We’ll ring the bells. Bells may only be rung in case of a parachute attack, so that ought to bring people within earshot out of their houses in a hurry. Come on.”

Without further ado she snatched up the lamp, crawled through the trap and swarmed down the ladder, only to pull up with a cry of dismay when she

saw that the bells were far out of reach suspended in space.

“We shall have to pull the rope,” she cried, and crossing the twigs, seized the nearest rope with both hands. It didn’t move. She flung her entire weight on it, but she might as well have assailed an iron pillar for all the impression she made on it. She threw up her hands in despair. “It’s no use. The rope must be tied down below.”

“Then it’s all up,” moaned Frecks. “Hark! What’s that?” she added tersely.

A distant hollow rumble echoed weirdly up the staircase. It sounded like a giant groaning somewhere far down in the earth.

Worrals opened her hands in a gesture of resignation. “It’s Corton and his gang, coming up the steps.”

“Then we’re cut off,” muttered Frecks.

Worrals looked quickly round the belfry. “We’ve still got a chance,” she said quickly. “They’ll assume we’re still on the roof. If we hide behind these nests they may go past us.” As she spoke she blew out the light.

Not without some noise, for the twigs were dry and brittle, the girls crossed to the far side of the chamber and crouched as low as the accumulation of sticks would permit. The noise coming up the stairs now sounded like an earthquake. Presently an eerie glow lighted the top of the stairway. An arm carrying an electric torch came into view. It was followed by Corton who, in turn, was followed by two of his assistants. With barely a glance at the nest-littered belfry they went swiftly up the ladder.

Before the legs of the last man had disappeared from sight Worrals was making for the stairway, pulling Frecks after her. Feeling their way by the rough walls they started down. Before they reached the bottom a shout from above told them their flight had been discovered, but it only hastened their descent. Worrals noticed a glow ahead, coming from the vestry, but she thought little of it, assuming that a light had been left there—as, indeed, it had.

“We’ve done it,” she said breathlessly but triumphantly as she burst into the vestry.

“Is that so?” sneered a voice.

Worrals swung round and saw Carl sitting in a nonchalant attitude on the flimsy cane chair with which the chamber was provided. A cigarette hung from his lips and his eyes rested broodingly on the fugitives. In his right hand, which rested on his knee, was an automatic.

“Stay where you are,” he grated. “You’ve had a good run, but it ends right here. You’re nice and handy for the churchyard.”

TIME IS SHORT

FOR a moment Worrals was stunned by sheer shock, but reaction followed swiftly. A fierce anger surged through her, but she took care not to show it. Instead, she adopted an attitude of passive resignation. But her eyes were busy, and this is what they saw.

The vestry was lighted by an oil lantern of the hurricane type, presumably the one for which, over a period of time, the matches had been struck. Carl was holding it in his left hand with the base resting on his knee. The two back feet of the chair on which he was seated rested on a strip of coconut matting, the material commonly used for covering stone floors; the front feet would also have rested on it had they touched the ground, but since Carl chose to lean back in an attitude of bored indifference, the chair was balanced on its hind legs only, and the front ones were in the air. So much Worrals saw at a glance. She saw, too, that the tunnel door was open, and as she could not see the key she knew that it must still be in the far side.

Now during this time the three men who had gone up the stairs could be heard descending, and she knew that if escape was to be attempted it would have to be now.

“You won’t mind if I sit down?” she said, her eyes on Carl’s cynical face, and without waiting for a reply she sank down wearily, as though she were exhausted. But even before she was properly on the floor her hand had reached out swiftly to the near end on the strip of matting. Her fingers closed over the rough fibre, and she gave it a violent jerk.

Carl’s chair, with its legs thus snatched from under it, went over backwards; and he, of course, went over with it. There was a crash and a rattle as he, the chair, the automatic and the lantern came into contact with the floor. The light, as Worrals had hoped, went out. She made a dash for the tunnel, catching Frecks by the elbow as she went.

“Run for it,” she hissed.

She pushed Frecks into the tunnel, but instead of following close behind, she turned and slammed the door. It was, of course, pitch dark, but her groping hand found what she sought. It was the key. As it rasped in the lock a heavy weight was flung against the far side of the door. There came the

muffled roar of an explosion, and she knew that Carl was using his gun; she heard the bullet thud into the door, but the soft lead failed to pierce the old oak. She sped on down the tunnel after Frecks.

“For the love of Mike, strike a match!” gasped Frecks.

Worrals obliged, and for the next few minutes she used her remaining matches with reckless abandon, for speed was the first consideration.

“Where are we making for?” panted Frecks.

“The rectory—there’s nowhere else.”

“But the door at the top of the stairs will be locked.”

“If it is, we’re trapped,” returned Worrals calmly. “But I can’t imagine them stopping to lock it behind them. We ought to find it open.”

And in this assumption she was correct, as was quickly proved.

Worrals paused on the top step. “We’ve got to get through the house; there’s no other way,” she whispered. “Come on, it’s neck or nothing now.”

The hall, a large square room into which the staircase opened, was empty, but voices could be heard in the library. With Frecks at her heels Worrals sped across the hall to the front door; but simultaneously the library door was opened, and she swerved to avoid being seen, for the front door was in full view of the library. It was a desperate moment, and she looked about wildly for a hiding place. There was only one. It was a massive oak chest, a common enough piece of furniture in such a house, under the window. Was it empty? If it was, it would be big enough to hold both of them. She lifted the lid and saw to her unspeakable relief that, except for one or two old croquet mallets at the bottom, there was nothing in it.

“Get in,” she breathed tersely, and following Frecks inside, lowered the lid quietly.

“Steady,” gasped Frecks. “Don’t forget the mistletoe bough. If it locks we shall be——”

Worrals kicked her on the shin.

Frecks took the hint and said no more, realizing herself that further conversation would be dangerous, for an absolute babble of voices had broken out in the hall. Corton could be heard above the others; apparently he had just returned from the vestry, and from his tone of voice it was clear that he was in a tearing temper. Whether he had succeeded in breaking through the tunnel door, or had opened the other door into the church, the girls had no means of knowing.

“Where are they?” he snarled viciously.

“They didn’t come through this way,” replied a voice.

“Don’t talk like a fool,” shouted Corton. “They couldn’t get out any other way.”

“Then they must have gone straight out through the front door,” answered the unknown speaker.

“All right. Then what are you all standing here for? Get out and find them. Get going, all of you. I’ll tear their hides off when I get my hands on them.” Corton was certainly in a fury.

The girls heard the front door open, and after that comparative silence reigned for a little while, although voices could be heard from time to time in the distance.

“I’m worried about that mistletoe bough story,” breathed Frecks. “One day somebody will open this chest and find two poor little skeletons——”

“Shut up,” hissed Worrals.

“Are you sure we can get out?”

“Yes—but not yet. The place is swarming with men. We shouldn’t get ten yards. Our only chance is to stay here until things quieten down.”

A quarter of an hour, a very slow quarter of an hour it seemed, went past, and then Corton came back. He was talking to Carl—there was no mistaking their voices.

Said Corton furiously, “We shall have to get out of this. If those girls have got away anything can happen. We’ll all get out and make an end of the place before it can be raided. We’ve finished our chief work here, anyway. The mines are all in place under the bridges.”

“Don’t forget the map showing which they are.”

“Don’t worry about that—it’s in my pocket.”

Worrals felt something like a cold hand settle on her heart as she heard these words and realized what they meant. Certain bridges had been mined so that they could be blown up when it suited the enemy to destroy them. A map showing which bridges they were was in Corton’s pocket. He was going to evacuate the rectory and take the map with him. One thing she could not quite understand was the reference to making an end of the place—obviously meaning the rectory. But enlightenment was soon forthcoming.

“But can you destroy the house without attracting a lot of attention?” asked Carl.

“Easiest thing in the world,” replied Corton. “I had that all worked out long ago. It will be done by a high-explosive bomb fitted with a time-fuse,

and a few well-placed incendiaries. The authorities will assume that one of our machines unloaded its bombs here on the way home. The thing happens somewhere nearly every night. Thus we shall kill two birds with one stone, as these English say.”

“Ah! You mean the old man upstairs—the real Corton?”

“Of course. The police will find his body in the wreckage and that will clean up everything very nicely. I thought he might come in useful, that’s why I didn’t get rid of him earlier. Tough luck on the old fellow—but war is war.”

With what horror the girls heard this cold-blooded villainy discussed in casual tones can be imagined, and Worrals had to clench her hands to control their trembling. Somewhere, a prisoner in the rectory, was the original incumbent, the real Corton. The man whom they knew by that name was not Corton at all. He was a spy who had taken on the rector’s identity. The whole plot was now revealed—or so Worrals thought. Actually, there was more to come.

“So you’ve decided to pull out right away?” said Carl.

“That’s it,” agreed Corton. “It will soon be dawn, so the sooner the better. The machine is all ready.” He laughed. “I wonder what the British Air Force would say if they knew that one of our machines had been sitting here for over twelve months?”

“You brought it here before the war?”

“Yes, in case we had to make a quick getaway. The time has come to use it, and we’d better get going. Call the fellows together. I’ll start the bomb and meet you down at the hangar.”

“How much time are you going to allow the fuse?”

“Say half an hour from now. That will give us plenty of time to pack up. The local observers will hear the machine in the air when we take off, and suppose it to be the one that dropped the bomb.”

“Isn’t there a risk of our being shot at?”

“None at all—we’ve made provision for that. One of my lads is handy with tools, and he’s contrived the neatest device you ever saw. A lever operates the nationality marks—a sliding panel affair. We can show the swastika or the R.A.F. markings, just as we like. We’ll show R.A.F. markings over this side, and our own markings as soon as we get across the Channel. Get the idea? We shall be the friend of everyone, so nobody will interfere with us.”

“Pretty smart. But won’t the machine be identified?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t matter. It’s an old American Rockheed, a converted transport. They’re as common as flies all over Europe.”

“I get it,” laughed Carl. “All right; I’ll get the boys together and meet you at the hangar.”

“You know where it is? If you don’t you’ll have a job to find it.”

“Under the shrubbery, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. The shrubs are in pots; they can be pulled out to clear a runway as soon as we’re ready. The entrance is under a steep part of the bank. You’ll see a tall holly bush—make for that and wait there.”

“Okay. I’ll be seeing you presently.”

Footsteps receded and silence fell.

Worrals’s brain was in a whirl, for these unsuspected revelations had followed each other so fast that she found it hard to keep pace with them. She wanted to think, to sit down and consider the whole thing, but there was no time for that now. She found Frecks’s face and whispered in her ear, “You heard that?”

“Every word,” answered Frecks grimly. “I don’t like the idea of that bomb. We’d better be going.”

“Wait,” muttered Worrals. “We’ve got to let Corton go first. I can still hear him moving about the house—*ssh*, here he comes.”

The girls remained silent while Corton came down the stairs. For a little while they could hear him moving about in the library; then he walked briskly across the hall to the front door. It slammed. Footsteps, swiftly receding, crunched on the gravel drive.

Worrals lifted the lid of the chest, got out and peered through the window. She noticed that the stars were paling, and a grey streak low down in the east announced the approach of dawn. She couldn’t see Corton.

“He’s gone,” she whispered. “Come on, we’ve got to get busy.”

Frecks was rather pale. “D’you think he’s set the bomb going?”

“Of course he has. It will blow the place to pieces and set the ruin on fire—but it should be some minutes before that happens. I’m not so much concerned with that as with stopping him getting away. You heard that conversation about our bridges being mined? He’s got the chart in his pocket and we’ve got to get it. We *must* get it. But we’ve something else to do first. Somewhere in this house there is a prisoner—the real Mr. Corton. We can’t leave him here to be blown up. Our first job must be to release him. You

keep *cave* at the window in case those thugs come back for anything. Whistle if you see them coming, and get back into the chest.”

Worrals was on her way to the stairs before she had finished speaking. She went up them two at a time, and did not pause until she came to the attic floor. In spite of her efforts to remain calm her pulses were racing, for she could not forget the bomb. True, judging from what Corton had said, the bomb was not due to explode for some time, but there was always a possibility that it might. She came to the first door. It was open, and she saw that it was the room in which she had been locked after she had been caught on the golf links. Two other rooms she tried in turn; they were both unlocked, and both empty. Only one remained, the one facing the end of the corridor. The door was locked, and after looking in vain for the key she beat on it with her fist.

“Hullo,” she cried, “is anyone in there?”

A feeble voice answered.

“Is that Mr. Corton?” she shouted.

The voice answered in the affirmative.

“All right, sir. Don’t worry. I’ll soon have you out,” promised Worrals.

But this, she saw with some dismay, was easier said than done. The door was not a heavy one, but it was strong enough to defy the charging tactics she first employed in the hope of bursting it open.

“Wait,” she shouted. “I’ll be back.”

Feeling that it would be a waste of time to look again for the key, which might be anywhere, she tore down the stairs in the hope of finding something, a tool or a weapon, that would serve her purpose; but she could not find anything in the bedrooms, not even a poker. She went on to the ground floor.

“What’s wrong?” asked Frecks quickly.

“I’ve found him, but I can’t get the beastly door open.”

“All the doors down here are locked too,” returned Frecks. “We’re going to have a job to get out.”

“We’ll deal with that when the time comes,” declared Worrals. Suddenly she stiffened, sniffing the air. She caught Frecks’s eye.

Frecks nodded. “It’s the fuse burning,” she said quietly. “You’d better get a move on with this rescue business or we shall be going out through the roof.”

Worrals remembered something. She flung open the chest and took out two of the croquet mallets. Tucking one under her left arm, and carrying the other over her shoulder, she raced back to the attic. Reaching the door she eyed it for a moment; then, choosing the weakest place, one of two large panels, she brought the head of the mallet against it with all her strength. It cracked, but did not splinter.

Frecks's face, as white as a lily, appeared at the head of the stairs. "You frightened me to death," she choked. "I thought it was the bomb. If you go on making that din they'll hear you outside."

"Get back to your post—and get a window open," snapped Worrals, and set about the door in a fury. Splinters flew. A hole appeared, and she lashed at the jagged edges until the head flew off the mallet. She dropped it and picked up the other.

A pale face, surmounted by white hair, appeared at the hole.

"Stand back!" cried Worrals desperately, for the reek of the burning fuse now reached her up the stairs.

"What's that burning?" asked the old man.

"A bomb," Worrals told him shortly. "It's likely to blow up at any minute. I'm trying to get you out. Stand clear."

The face disappeared, and she went on with her work, sometimes using her hands and sometimes the club. When the handle broke she seized the short end and used it like a hammer. It amazed her that a door could be so difficult to break down, but in the end she managed to knock a large hole through the middle of it.

"Can you get through?" she called, panting from her exertions.

The rector, who was an old man, and feeble at that, got through after a struggle in which his black jacket was nearly torn from his back.

"What are you girls doing——?" he began, but Worrals cut him short.

She caught him by the arm. "Please don't talk now," she pleaded. "Hurry!" The trouble was, she had no idea of how long she had been hammering at the door. It seemed a long time—longer than it really was. She went down the stairs with the rector following her.

Frecks was waiting at the bottom. "For the love of Mike let's get out," she gasped. "You've been half an hour."

"Have you got a window open?"

"Yes—this way." Frecks led the way at a run to one of the library windows. It opened above a mossy path, beyond which lay a belt of shrubs.

Between them the girls managed to get the old man through, not without difficulty.

“I’m going after Corton now,” announced Worrals belligerently.

“But I’m Corton,” protested the rector.

“I know you are,” flashed Worrals. “I mean the spy who has been masquerading as you. Could you find your way to the village?”

“Of course.”

“Then go—and don’t stop. Keep under cover as much as you can or those spies will shoot you.”

“Very well—but aren’t you coming with me?”

“No. We’ve other work to do. You go to the village and send someone for the police, but on no account must anyone come near the house. It will blow up at any minute.”

“All right, if you say so,” agreed the rector. He turned, and breaking into a gentle trot disappeared round a bend in the shrubbery.

“Thank goodness,” breathed Worrals. “Now let’s see about these spies.”

“But we can’t take on a gang of armed men single-handed,” Frecks pointed out, not unreasonably.

“We’re going to stop them—I don’t know how, but we’re going to,” declared Worrals aggressively. “We’ll put the machine out of action.”

“That’s fine,” agreed Frecks, “but d’you mind if we get a bit further away from this house for a start?”

Worrals dived into the shrubbery.

A DESPERATE FLIGHT

DAWN was now lighting a wild and threatening sky with a torch of crimson flame. Its sullen glow was reflected on dark, shapeless masses of wind-torn nimbus cloud that were being hounded across the heavens by a freshening breeze that brought with it a promise of rain. But the girls were too concerned with their own affairs to pay any heed to the weather. As soon as they were at a safe distance from the house Worrals pulled up.

“We’d better have a look where we are,” she decided. “If we go blundering about in these bushes we may crash right into them.”

“They haven’t started the engines yet or we should have heard them,” Frecks pointed out.

“They won’t start up until they’re absolutely ready to leave the ground, on account of the noise,” returned Worrals. “Stand fast a minute while I make a reconnaissance.” She turned to an apple-tree that was so far gone in years that it leaned to one side, and scrambled up the inclining trunk. Reaching a crutch she balanced herself and surveyed her surroundings. She was prepared for something unusual, but hardly for what she saw, and her first feeling was one of thankfulness that they had stopped when they did, or they would certainly have blundered into their enemies. This is what she saw.

About fifty yards in front, in the very direction in which they had been walking, the shrubbery mounted a steep bank that extended for some distance before finally giving way to a gentle slope that merged into the golf course. A rectangular clearing, open at one end, had been made in the shrubbery by the simple expedient of lifting bodily out of the ground a number of evergreens, bays, laurels and rhododendrons of which the shrubbery was largely composed. Since these were in large pots this had obviously been a simple matter. The shrubs had been piled on either side of what was, in effect, a runway wide enough to permit the passage of an aircraft. At the higher end of it yawned the mouth of an underground chamber, the size and form of a hangar, which the uprooted shrubs had concealed. It seemed to go far back under the bank. Standing at the entrance, its nose pointing towards the open runway, was an aeroplane, which Worrals recognized at once as a Rockheed twin-engined commercial 10-seater. Near

it were seven men, including Corton and Carl, and the two German officers. Worrals noted that the machine carried British nationality markings; she tried to hear the conversation that was going on, but could only catch a few words of it. Carl said something about “How long . . . ?” Corton looked at his watch and answered, “Five minutes.”

Worrals waited for no more. She swarmed down the tree. “They’re just in front of us,” she told Frecks tersely. “The machine is there, all ready to take off. The whole gang is there, too. We must stop them getting away.”

“How?” asked Frecks, naïvely.

“Don’t ask me,” snapped Worrals. “But we’ll find a way. Let’s get closer. I don’t think there’s much risk of being seen, but we’d better go quietly.”

Ducking under branches that straggled across their path they pushed on until they came to the edge of the clearing where, behind the ample cover provided by the uprooted shrubs, they stopped to re-survey the position. Worrals saw that in the brief interval that had elapsed since she had last seen it, the scene had changed. The machine had been dragged clear into the open, and a man was in the act of starting the engines. But what astounded her was the fact that the aircraft now carried German markings. She recalled what Corton had said about them being interchangeable, but she could not understand why they had elected to show German markings at this moment. As it happened, Corton’s next remark explained it.

Carl ran to him, and pointing to the black Latin cross on the fuselage, exclaimed, “What’s the idea?”

Corton answered, “It’s only while we take off—to give the people in the village a chance to see us. It will confirm the impression that the house was blown up by a raider. We’ll go straight up into the clouds and then switch back to British markings until we’re the other side of the water. I——”

The rest of what he said was drowned in the roar of the engines as they came to life. The man who had started them throttled back until they were ticking over with the quiet precision of well-oiled sewing machines; then he climbed down, leaving the cockpit empty, went round to the rear of the machine where several suitcases were stacked—presumably to help to load them. At the same time Corton took Carl by the arm, shouted something to the others, walked to the machine and went on board, taking Carl with him.

The position now, as far as Worrals could make it out, was this. Corton and Carl were the only people in the machine. They were in the cabin. She could just see them through the windows, with their heads together, talking.

Of Corton's assistants, two were doing something in the hangar. The third was by the suitcases. The two German officers were busy with a roll of fuse-wire, one carrying the end to a safe distance, making it clear that the hangar was to be blown up in the same manner as the house.

Worrals knew that within a minute the machine would be in the air, so if anything was to be done to prevent it leaving it would have to be now. An idea came to her, and the very audacity of it gave her a feeling of constriction round the heart. But this was replaced almost at once by a wild exultation. She clutched Frecks's arm.

"I'm going to fly this machine," she said, in a curiously calm voice. "We've got to reach the cockpit in a single dash. Your job will be to keep Corton and Carl away from me until we're in the air. They won't dare to touch me then for fear of crashing. Are you ready? Go!"

Worrals had no intention of allowing Frecks to dwell on a scheme which, on the face of it, seemed madness. Nor for that matter dare she trust herself to think too much about it; it was like taking a high dive; she knew that the more she thought about it the more alarming the prospect would appear. Flinging aside the laurel behind which she had been hiding, she sped like an arrow towards the open door of the cabin. The distance was about twelve yards. Faintly, as she ran, she heard a shout, and out of the corner of her eye saw one of the German officers drop the wire he was holding; but she neither stopped nor swerved. Corton and Carl were the men with whom she was most concerned, for she realized that if they saw her before she reached the machine she would never get on board. She was not so concerned with the others. The number of people in the cabin was really immaterial once she had got her hand on the control column.

Regardless of danger, she sped towards her goal, and reaching it, went into it like a rabbit going into its burrow with a terrier at its heels. As she turned to the right towards the cockpit she heard shouts of incredulity and alarm break from Corton and his companion. A crash followed, but she did not look round. Panting, she flung herself into the pilot's seat, and with a single sweep of her hand jerked the throttle open. The engines bellowed; the aircraft quivered like a startled pony and began to move forward, slowly, but with ever-increasing speed.

She now gripped the control column with both hands, determined that whatever happened she would not relinquish it. If the worst came to the worst she would wreck the machine. Now that it was moving one kick on the rudder-bar would be enough. Strangely enough, she was not in the least afraid. Her one sensation was one of unreality; the whole thing seemed to be

happening with the curious deliberation of a slow-motion film, in which she was a spectator rather than an actor.

Raising her eyes for an instant from the windscreen she found herself staring into a reflector that revealed the interior of the cabin. She had only time for a brief glance, but it presented a picture that she never forgot.

Immediately behind her, facing the cabin, with her back to the control seat, stood Frecks. She seemed to be fighting three men, fighting with the ferocity of a wild-cat. She had got one arm round Corton's neck, and having seized her own wrist with the other hand, had obtained a kind of stranglehold which he sought in vain to break. Locked thus, they swayed and staggered from side to side, while Carl, brandishing a revolver which he held by the muzzle, dodged from one side to the other trying to find a way of hitting Frecks without hitting Corton. Behind these three was one of the German pilots who had apparently managed to follow Frecks into the machine, the door of which was still open. Bristling with anger and excitement he was trying to get past the struggling figures to the cockpit.

This was the picture engraved on Worrals's brain, although she was only able to observe it for a split second. It was, of course, impossible for her to take any part in the struggle, or go to Frecks's assistance, for she had to concentrate on getting the machine off the ground, and this was no easy matter, for it was inclined to "swing." The knowledge that one mistake would result in a crash from which not one of the occupants was likely to emerge alive, did nothing to make her task easier. To start with, she had never flown such a heavy machine, and everything—the arrangement of the instrument board, the feel of the controls and the field of vision—seemed strange. To make matters worse the ground was uneven, and this, with the struggle that was going on, caused the machine to rock dangerously. The run was downhill and so narrow on account of the trees that the slightest swerve one way or the other would mean instant disaster. All she could do was set her teeth, grip the control column, take a mark on the horizon as a guide to keep her straight, and wait for the machine to get enough speed to lift. On either side the trees flashed past as though she were in an express train.

She felt the controls tighten as the speed increased. The vibration of the undercarriage stopped as the wheels left the ground, only to occur again with greater violence than before as they settled down. In front of her was a hedge; it seemed to be rushing towards her at frightful speed, and a conviction came over her that she would not be able to clear it. In sheer desperation she pulled the control column back.

The machine lifted, hung for a moment, wallowing as if it might stall, and then went on as the engines picked up. She leaned back to recover her composure, for the strain of the last few seconds had been intense, and snatched another glance at the reflector.

Corton and Carl were holding Frecks down in one of the seats; it seemed to require the efforts of both of them to keep her down. The German was on his way to the cockpit, his expression venomous. Reaching the seat he seized Worrals by the shoulder. The machine swerved sickeningly.

“Let me go, you fool,” shouted Worrals. “Do you want to kill the lot of us?” And she meant every word she said.

The German stood behind her, his hands raised, fingers clawed. But he realized well enough the danger of touching her, for Worrals was deliberately holding the machine close to the ground, so that one jerk of the control column would be enough to send them crashing into it.

“Let go!” shouted the German. “I’ll fly her.”

“Get out of my way,” snarled Worrals.

Carl joined the German. “Get out of that seat,” he spluttered. His face was white, and it was obvious that he was badly frightened—as indeed he had every reason to be, not knowing whether Worrals could really fly or not.

“Get away, both of you, or I’ll fly into the next tree,” cried Worrals. She gripped the control column firmly.

The German made a sudden dart forward, and seizing her wrists tried to drag her hands from the controls; he managed to get one clear, but Worrals kicked the rudder-bar, and the machine side-slipped so violently that Carl only saved himself from falling by clutching the back of the seat.

Worrals righted the machine, but continued to fly low. “That’s what will happen if you touch me,” she warned. And in spite of the desperate state of affairs she could have laughed at the expression of terrified impotence on the men’s faces.

All the same, she knew she could not go on like this. She had got to land somewhere before the spies resorted to more drastic measures to remove her. She had not forgotten that Carl had an automatic. Indeed, she saw him take it in his hand, and she answered by forcing the machine still lower until the wheels were only just clearing the tree-tops. She knew that in such a position they daren’t touch her, for even if they shot her dead the machine would probably crash before the pilot could take over the controls. Her only chance of retaining her advantage was in flying low, but she couldn’t go on doing that indefinitely. She would have to find an aerodrome. Having found

one, she would have to make such a landing that the machine would be damaged; then, whatever happened to her, the spies would have no means of escaping from the country. She pressed her foot lightly on the rudder-bar to bring her nose into line with her own squadron aerodrome.

Carl must have divined her intention, for he sprang forward with a snarl of rage. He took a fresh grip on his automatic. To the German he shouted, "Catch the machine when she falls. It's our only chance." He raised the automatic and held the muzzle at Worrals's head. "Let go of that stick or I'll shoot you," he rasped, and Worrals knew that he meant it.

"Shoot," she invited grimly, her eyes on the reflector.

She saw his finger tightening on the trigger, and the sight sent a fresh burst of anger surging through her. She laughed hysterically.

"All right, if that's how you want it," she cried, "we all go out together." And as she finished speaking she kicked the rudder-bar viciously with her left foot, and dragged the control column over to the same side.

The machine responded instantly to such harsh treatment. It flung up a wing in a vertical bank and plunged towards the ground.

A SOUND EXCUSE

As the machine roared earthward the engines seemed to change their note. Above their vibrant roar came another sound, one which, once heard, is never forgotten. It was the harsh staccato grunting of multiple machine-guns. Fierce, whip-like strokes seemed to lash the fuselage, causing the machine to quiver. Glass shivered. Splinters flew.

It was more by instinct than actual thought that Worrals snatched the control column and dragged it right back into her thigh. She could not understand what was happening. She felt that the whole thing was getting beyond her. In a dazed sort of way she pulled the machine out of its dive, aware that it was going to be touch and go whether the wheels cleared the ground. At the finish she was so low that she saw the grass lie flat under the rush of air. Then the nose came up and the danger was over.

She looked in the reflector and was amazed to see only the German. He was clutching his arm. Between his fingers an ugly red stain was spreading.

Again came the vicious clatter of machine-guns, and she swerved wildly, realizing subconsciously that it must have been her first swerve, when Carl had threatened to shoot her, that had saved the machine. Snatching a glance through a side window she just caught a glimpse of a Spitfire streaking up past her in a vertical zoom. A letter E painted on the nose told her that it was Bill Ashton's machine.

In a flash Worrals understood. Bill had been patrolling the area of the golf links, and had seen the machine. It carried German identification markings. That explained everything. Bill, naturally, was trying to shoot the machine down.

Looking again, she caught her breath sharply as she saw the Spitfire banking to resume its attack. Its nose was already coming into line. In a state of mind not far from panic she flung her own machine into a bank and roared back over her course, kicking the rudder-bar first one way and then the other, causing the aircraft to zigzag, and so prevent the Spitfire from getting a "sitting" shot at her.

"Frecks!" she yelled, looking into the reflector. "Frecks!"

She saw that Frecks was on her feet, swaying, her face buried in her hands. Her jacket was torn and her hair awry. She ignored the call. She seemed dazed.

Again came the clamour of machine-guns. Something snatched at Worrals's sleeve, and the altimeter exploded in a cloud of splinters. She ducked instinctively as the Spitfire passed so close that collision seemed inevitable.

She knew that if she remained in the air the end was a foregone conclusion, and it could not be long delayed. Her only hope lay in getting on the ground. Even if she crashed it was better than remaining in the air, a target for Bill's deadly guns. Moistening her lips, for her mouth was parched, she peered forward through the windscreen. The first thing she saw was the rectory, a blazing ruin. Evidently the bomb had done its work, but the spectacle left her unmoved. What upset her far more was a Flight of three Spitfires racing towards her.

Frecks staggered up. There was blood on her cheek. "What's going on?" she asked in a strangled voice.

"Lie down and stay down!" yelled Worrals. "Cover your face and get your knees up to your chin. I'm going to crash." As she finished speaking she pulled back the throttle, and the noise of the engines subsided to a purr. She brought her nose level with the golf course, and glided towards it.

A glance over her shoulder showed the four Spitfires now together, and she knew that Bill had joined the Flight. She thought for a moment of looking for the lever that controlled the nationality markings, but realized there was no time for that now. In any case it was unlikely that the pursuing machines would notice the change.

She was too low now to take any chances with the controls, and except for a mild side-slip to lose height more quickly she could do no more than hold on towards the golf course, now a quarter of a mile away and a hundred feet below her. Smoke pouring through a window made her look round, and a cry of horror broke from her lips when she saw that her port engine was responsible.

The sensation of waiting for the burst of bullets that would finally make an end was terrible, but she kept her head and straightened out over the narrow runway between the trees where—so long ago it seemed—she and Frecks had seen the German machine swoop down to pick up the message. The ground floated up to meet her. Automatically she flattened out. The machine glided on, losing height. The wheels bumped, bumped again, and vibrated in the long grass. Slowly the aircraft came to a standstill.

Even before it had properly stopped she had abandoned the controls and was making for the door, yelling to Frecks to get out. And it was not until then that she was able to see what had happened in the machine during the brief, one-sided combat.

It seemed that Bill's first burst of fire had struck the machine fairly high, just aft the pilot's seat. All three men had been hit by bullets, and Frecks must have owed her escape to the fact that she was lower than the others, who were holding her down. Corton lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. Carl had sagged into a seat, either dead or unconscious; his automatic lay at his feet. The German officer appeared to have been struck only in the arm; deathly pale, he was conscious, but too weak from loss of blood to have any fight left in him.

Worrals picked up the automatic and addressed him. "Stay where you are," she ordered curtly, and went on to Frecks who, having got through the door, had flopped down on the grass outside.

"What's the matter?" cried Worrals in acute anxiety. "Have you been hit?"

"No—but I feel—funny. I think I'm going to—faint," answered Frecks, shakily.

"Oh, no, you're not," Worrals told her emphatically. "There's no time for that now."

She looked up, for the air was filled with the roar of low-flying planes. She saw that three were circling; the fourth was gliding over the golf course, obviously going to land. She waved—she could think of nothing else to do. In a vague sort of way she hoped she might be recognized, or, failing that, the signal would be taken as a sign of surrender, and so prevent any further shooting. Suddenly, without warning, the scene became blurred, then dark. Her legs seemed to go weak. "Heavens," she thought, "it's me that's going to faint." She sat down abruptly and let her head hang forward between her knees, fighting a deadly nausea. After a minute she began to feel better, and became aware that some one was shouting. Looking up she saw that the Spitfire had landed; Bill Ashton was running down the fairway towards her, on his face an expression of amazement and alarm.

Coming up he caught her by the shoulder. "Take it easy, kid," he muttered. "What's going on here?"

Worrals got unsteadily to her feet. "Phew!" she gasped. "I can't tell you all about it now. There are some casualties in that machine—a German air

force officer among them. They were making for Germany, but we stopped them. I'd got the controls when you butted in and plastered us with lead."

Bill ran to the machine. Presently he came back, shaking his head like a man who finds difficulty in believing what he sees.

Frecks came over, dragging a tangle of hair out of her eyes. She seemed to be recovering. "You don't happen to have a cup of tea on you, Bill, I suppose?" she asked, wearily. "I feel all washed up."

"That's what comes of taking your week-end leave with this wild woman." Bill indicated Worrals. "Stand fast," he added seriously. "I'll try to get help." He began making signals to the still circling machines.

The leader left the formation and side-slipped to a pretty landing. The pilot got out and hurried towards the group. It was Squadron Leader McNavish.

"Miss Worrals," he said severely. "When I restored your leave it did not occur to me that you would have the temerity to overstay it. I trust you have a sound excuse?"

Worrals controlled a desire to go into hysterics. She swallowed. "I never offer excuses, sir," she said stiffly. "But if you'll take a look in the cabin of that Rockheed you'll find an explanation. In the pocket of the man on the floor you'll find a chart showing certain bridges in this country which have been mined."

The C.O. blinked like an owl in sunlight. He walked quickly to the big machine, went into the cabin, and returned looking stupefied.

"We'll get back to the Station," he announced in a strange voice. "Ashton, get into the air and radio the aerodrome for surface transport. You'd better ask for an ambulance at the same time."

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There is little more to tell. Two hours later the girls, washed, changed, and looking little the worse for their experience, sat in the Squadron office telling the story of their adventures to a party of senior officers, which included the C.O., two officers of the Intelligence branch, and the Commandant-in-Chief of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. They did not interrupt, but listened in astonishment as Worrals narrated the events that had occurred since she and Frecks left the aerodrome on week-end leave. The map which had been in Corton's pocket lay on the desk with the one which she had posted to Bill.

From time to time an orderly brought in signals from those who were carrying out investigations on the spot, messages which confirmed Worrals's story. From them it was learned that the men who had been left on the ground at the rectory had been captured. It was also learned that the real rector had reached the village and, although he was still suffering from shock, he was unhurt and little worse for his confinement in the attic in which he had languished for months. It seemed that he had engaged "Corton" as a curate. This man had promptly locked him up and given it out in the village that the rector had had a nervous breakdown, requiring complete rest.

Bill gave his version of the affair, which was very much as the girls had deduced. After Worrals had telephoned to him from the stables he had traced the call through the operator, with the result that the stables had been raided and the post boxes in the neighbourhood cleared.

Thus, the map which Worrals had posted had been collected before Carl could get to the post-office. Later, when Bill had learned that the girls had not been found at the stables he had flown down to the golf course to look for signs of them; and the girls realized that it must have been his machine which they saw from the library window. Corton's fears that the rectory might be raided were well founded, for the police had drawn a cordon round the whole district and were fast closing in when the Rockheed took off. Had the rector not warned them of their danger, some of them would have been blown up when the explosion occurred. Bill's Flight was then in the air, with the C.O., keeping watch. When the Rockheed appeared, little dreaming that the girls were in it, he had attempted to shoot it down; and had it not been for Worrals's dive when Carl was threatening to shoot her, no doubt he would have done so. Naturally, he was unaware of this at the time, but as notes were compared, these details emerged.

When Worrals had told all there was to tell, Squadron Leader McNavish leaned back in his chair and regarded the assembled company knowingly. "There you are," he exclaimed. "I've always maintained that these girls were smart."

"You're telling us," whispered Frecks in Worrals's ear.

One of the Intelligence officers lit a cigarette thoughtfully. "Yes," he said softly. "I was just thinking the same thing. We could do with a couple——"

The C.O. sprang to his feet. "Oh, no, you don't," he snorted. "You can't come down here and take my officers just as you please."

Lady Thornton-Bates, the Commandant-in-Chief of the Women's Service, smiled. "As the question of promotion is likely to arise, I think it

should be left to the officers themselves to decide whether they would rather stay here, or . . .” She looked at Worrals questioningly.

“If it’s a question of staying here, or going to another station, if you don’t mind we’ll stay here,” put in Worrals.

Squadron Leader McNavish astounded everybody by laughing aloud. “There you are—there’s loyalty for you. No officer of mine has ever willingly left me,” he boasted. He looked at his watch. “It’s lunch time,” he announced. “Perhaps the ladies will honour us . . . ?”

“Thank you, sir,” said Worrals. “I shall be delighted.”

Frecks nodded. “Sure,” she drawled, “that goes for me too.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Worrals of the W.A.A.F.* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]